

“Lost and Found”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, September 15, 2019

1 Timothy 1 and Luke 15

Today’s Gospel is one we relate to all too easily. For we know what it means to lose something and search for it till it’s found. Any one who has spent some time on a golf course, knows well the feeling of going into tall grass or a forest of saplings and underbrush to search for your lost golf ball. You swish your club in front of you, looking for the little white ball and invariably you find a couple, but none of them are yours.

Who doesn’t know the joy of finding the one lost sock? Who knows the emotions when you go around your neighbourhood putting up posters for your lost cat or dog? Or the panic when you’re searching for the lost child in a crowd, the lost T4 slip for your income tax return, or the lost debit card?

As a commentary writes, “When one goes missing, God goes into search mode. God’s nature is love, and love looks like one who goes out tirelessly searching, because the one who is lost is so lost that she cannot find her way back home.”<sup>1</sup> My husband Keith went out to the barn at night, searching with his flashlight for 45 minutes, looking for the kittens. He searched and he searched and he searched. He diligently searched in the same way the woman lit her lamp and searched her home for the lost coin. He searched for far longer than I would have. And yes, he did find them – in the tall grasses by the barn.

The first letter from Timothy, attributed to Paul, offers Paul as ‘Exhibit A’ of a sheep that was lost and is now found. We will sing Amazing Grace in a few minutes, and you’ll know these words, ‘I once was lost, but now am found’ which easily echo this gospel passage. No matter how lost we feel, we will always be found by the Shepherd who knows every nook and cranny of our stories and who will never stop trying to find us if we stray from the fold.

Paul includes in his opening words to Timothy, the same words he offers throughout his letters in the bible, words of his ‘call’, his turning around moment when on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians, he was blinded by a light, fell from his horse, and came to know the grace of God. He says, “Even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence, Christ has judged me faithful and appointed me to his service. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost.” (1 Tim 1:12-13, 15)

Jump over to Luke 15 and there are sinners everywhere. In fact, they’re coming to have dinner with Jesus. The Pharisees and the scribes are standing at the edges, watching this gathering happening before their eyes and muttering how this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word Biblical Commentary, Year C, Vol 4, Pastoral Perspective, 70.

The United Church of Canada is pretty quiet when it comes to talking about sinners. It's not the language we use in our liturgies. Only in the last few decades has the Church even observed the Season of Lent, with its theme of repentance and forgiveness for our sins.

In the newly released, 'The Theology of the United Church of Canada', Sandra Beardsall offers some context for our church's position on Sin: "The UCC's official theology of sin and redemption has not substantially changed in ninety years. Human beings have surrendered to sin, the church has consistently stated, and only God can redeem them, which God does, graciously, in Jesus Christ."<sup>2</sup>

You may be familiar with the creeds of the wider church, the Nicene and the Apostle's Creed. For quite a while now, the United Church uses A New Creed as its confessional statement in worship. We love our 1968 New Creed. "In life, in death, in life beyond death, we are not alone. Thanks be to God." This phrase alone shouts 'United Church of Canada' whenever I hear it, read it, say it. But did you know, as my Doctrine book states, that it was "not intended to be a full doctrinal statement, but rather one for optional use in worship at the time one would normally recite a creed, likely the Apostles' Creed. It was created to be short, "memorable" ... and it does not mention human sin directly."<sup>3</sup> Note that both the Nicene and the Apostles' Creed include the 'forgiveness of sins' in their statements, but the New Creed leaves it out.

Sandra Beardsall continues, "It is not clear to what extent UCC members have been willing to own for themselves what the church has called sin or sinfulness ... They have sung about sin and redemption, and prayed corporate prayers of confession throughout the church's history ... But UCC congregations have rarely demanded personal public testimony, so individuals have generally made their own contracts with God around sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation."<sup>4</sup> So, as a public church, we're rather tight-lipped about confessing our personal sins other than through a corporate prayer of confession. We don't have personal testimonials. We aren't in the practice of confessing our sins to a priest, as done in the Catholic faith.

Lois Malcolm, Professor of Systematic Theology at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota, observed, "Sinners *repent* because they know they are *lost* and thus can avail themselves of the transformation that comes with God's *finding* them. By contrast, the righteous do not need to repent presumably because they don't think they are lost ... They don't need God to find them."<sup>5</sup>

The scene in Luke is filled with controversy and grumbling. Why is someone actually resentful that Jesus is speaking to sinners? Isn't that a good thing? The Pharisees and scribes are caught up in their resentment that Jesus is sharing his time with others not as 'worthy as them; *instead* of thinking about the joy in heaven because Jesus *is* speaking to sinners!

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<sup>2</sup> Don Schweitzer, Robert C. Fennell, Michael Bourgeois, Editors, *The Theology of the United Church of Canada*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2019), 102.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>5</sup> [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1782](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1782)

We need to also ask ourselves, have *we* lost ‘God’? Our days and schedules are so busy that we can barely say we’ll be in church for an hour on Sunday. William Willimon writes, “The modern world teaches us to narrate our lives without reference to God. It’s all *our* decisions, *our* actions, *our* feelings and desires.” It’s all about us. We struggle to find the time to find God in our busy worlds. Courtney and I are presenting a mid-week worship service, starting Wednesday, October 9<sup>th</sup>, running the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesdays of the month, to help you find God in the middle of your week. The Wednesday Night Church is a half hour of calm and reflection – a time to centre yourself in your busy week.

My commentary suggested, “Jesus understands that those on the fringe of the community are integral to what the community in all its fullness should be. Until they return, the community is incomplete. The parables are about a hospitality that seeks to forgive and restore.”<sup>6</sup> So back then, the dynamic was righteousness vs. sinners. In today’s context, it’s about us and those who don’t look like us. It’s about the dominant group and the marginalized. This reminded me of something in my thesis work, about the call to the church to go outside of its comfort zone and build relationship with people who are not like them. For what defines a community in its fullness? The building of relationship between all of its parts.

Parker Palmer offers a vision for the church, a vision that includes friend and stranger alike, “For the church preaches a vision of human unity which means very little if not acted out in the public realm. Surely it is a vision which claims more than the commonality of those who think and act and look alike. Surely this vision reaches out to include those who are alien, different, stranger.”<sup>7</sup>

The shepherd comes home and calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” And the woman when she has found her coin, calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost!”

Once you were lost, once you were broken, once you were down-hearted, once you were a stranger. But now you are found, now you are restored, now you are hopeful, now you are welcomed! And there is much joy!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Feasting on the Word Biblical Commentary, Year C, Vol 4, Pastoral Perspective, 72.

<sup>7</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America’s Public Life*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), 26.