

Lost and Found, Six Years Later

A sermon by The Rev Keenan Kelsey Noe Valley Ministry PC(USA) 9/16/07

LUKE 15:1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 15:2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 15:3 So he told them this parable: 15:4 "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 15:5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 15:6 and when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 15:7 Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 15:8 "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 15:9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 15:10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The last time I preached on this text was six years ago, less than a week after the 9/11 tragedy. That year, we began with the word "lost."

Lost were the lives of thousands of innocent men, women, and children; the memories that could have been made, that should have been made.

Lost were the dreams and hopes of husbands, wives, children, grandparents, friends, and neighbors.

Lost was the security we once felt, our illusion of control both in our personal lives and in our national life. Lost was a world, a country, without fear.

Gone was our American immunity; and lost was our belief that two great oceans give us protection; that a massive military, a weapons arsenal, and sophisticated technology and intelligence can make us invulnerable.

Lost was our innocence, our wide-eyed belief in political freedom and the superiority of capitalism and democracy. If we just act decently and in order, all will be well.

We cried over our losses.

But we also read the parables, and we remembered that in God's world, FOUND is always the last word, and rejoicing is always the appropriate response.

Today we meet God as a shepherd searching for a lost sheep. In Jesus' day, this image would have conjured up a frantic fearful peasant who had lost one of his master's sheep. Accountable their safety, he would be required to pay for the lost one out of his own meager earnings. One sheep was many weeks' income.

Then God is depicted as a homemaker, turning her house upside-down in search of a lost coin. Her franticness would also have been understood, because the amount of ten gold coins was a typical dowry for a bride. These coins were really her only security against an untimely loss of a spouse or other emergencies that might crop up in her life. To lose even one coin was to lose one tenth of her worldly possessions.

The shepherd and the woman search, not until they are tired or until it is dark or until they can think of no other hillside or corner to probe. They search until the lost is found. Until the wrong is right again. Until we are whole.

God found us six years ago and rescued us with a love like I have seldom seen: love and courage and heroism and compassion and community. And God rejoiced in us. We were reminded that in all faiths, love is stronger than hate, and that love lived out in justice will ultimately prevail. We began praying, praying not only because it seemed all we could do, but because praying suddenly seemed important and God seemed real and oh so necessary. And after God found us, we began finding one another, encouraging one another, doing all we could for one another.

God is not done searching. The lostness within the human community is still a crisis for God. The God of the Christian faith is no Absolute, existing in solitary bliss and perfection, but a God who lives in the perpetual giving of Self, who shares the life that God created, who loves each of us despite our wanderings and sorrows and suffering, and who is always working to redeem us, to help us find meaning and purpose and power where we found none.

Remember the first words of the Gospel text? These vignettes were told in response to religious authorities who knew only one measure of righteousness, adherence to the purity laws and strictures of worship. They were not only perplexed but scandalized, even angry, that a rabbi of Jesus' stature would make himself unclean by eating with harlots and tax collectors. Jesus wanted them to understand that nothing in the world can change if you don't go into the streets and find the lost.

Jesus clearly is talking about us, the lost and the lonely, the ones searched for, yearned for, embraced, and rejoiced over. But having felt that, having been embraced, have you ever considered that Jesus is also inviting you to join the ones doing the searching? It's kind of like a giant game of hide and seek, where as soon as you are found, you join forces with the one who is "it." Even as we absorb God's love for us, God's hope for us, we are also asked to take up the baton ourselves, to see ourselves as God's emissaries, designated project managers. Disciples.

Indeed, there is no teaching of Jesus, anywhere, that does not first offer the love and mercy and embrace of God; but then asks us to pass it on.

Are you able? Have you felt God's rejoicing over your own strength and goodness enough to be able to respond? Can you join God's search party?

For us, that might mean continuing to ask the same hard questions we began to ask six years ago -- not about the attack but about our on-going response to it. Are we culpable in this global eruption of hatred and fear? What is it in the way that we are living, organizing our societies, and treating each other that makes violence seem plausible to so many people? How has America participated in the global problems that make people to hurt each other to advance their own interests? Have we been too confident – too arrogant?

And what about the war on Iraq? Both the teachings of Jesus (remember, "blessed are the peacemakers" and "love your enemies") and the rigorous criteria of the "just war" from Augustine and others in the Christian tradition clearly leave believers with at least a *presumption against war*. And the ignominious origins and now-disputed rationales for this war in particular, along with its enormous human cost, clearly put the burden of proof on the war's supporters much more than its critics

This week we are being asked to join in the Iraq Moratorium, an on-going demonstration of our horror at the on-going war in Iraq. The initial action is straight-forward: on this Friday, and every third Friday of the month hereafter, we are asked to wear either a black armband or a black ribbon. And we have those for you to take today, if you are so inclined. Other actions may follow, but this is the start.

We can also pray. As people of faith, we believe in the power of prayer to soften the hardest of hearts and open the way to peace and reconciliation. Jim Wallis' Sojourners organization is collecting -20,000 prayers for Congress to bring an end to this war. Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) has agreed to read from a selection of prayers during the House debate on the war later this month.

On October 7 and 8, there will be an interfaith fast to express distress and urge an end the war. The idea is that Christians, Muslims, Jews and others will share a meal together on Sunday night the 7th, then commit to fast through the day on Monday, and break their fast with a meal together after sundown early April. We will participate.

The Sudanese area of Darfur is another place to go searching for the lost. While the prospects for Darfur' appear bleak, we can work together to push for a lasting solution in the region. UNICEF Ambassador Lucy Liu has committed to speak out for Darfur's children and asks us to join her. You can find her petition on the web.

Next Friday, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon will convene the "Darfur Contact Group" of 17 leaders to help set the agenda for Darfur's peace talks. The mass killing in Darfur is a stain on the conscience of the world. This Avaaz initiative is built on the principle that every human life is of equal worth. This is our best hope yet for voices to triumph over violence. You can sign a petition for this on the web as well.

Perhaps God's search party will look into our stewardship of this earth. When I hear Jeremiah prophesy "and all the birds of the air had fled," I feel the catch in my

throat and the tears in my eyes. I'm sure Jeremiah had no concept of a disaster such as global warming. He was preaching against the tendency of his people to worship the fertility gods the gods that promised good harvests and fat, healthy livestock. But I think we can read this passage with global warming in mind because the base cause of global warming is human greed, our insistence that the economy must continue to grow and that our standard of living must continue to rise. In that sense, the gods that Jeremiah worried about are alive and well and their icons are the credit cards and gasoline refineries and refrigerator-like air conditioners. "Because of this the earth shall mourn." Even Jeremiah said, do something, this does not have to be. Go search for the lost.

Like most coins, some people get lost through another's carelessness and neglect, for example, children of the inner city, children of the homeless, children abandoned and diseased. The immigrants and undocumented workers, the Katrina victims still without homes or schools or insurance payments, those without health care.

There is a plenty of LOSS in our world. And the search and rescue is often messy and hard and frustrating. But the divine irony is, it is often ourselves that we end up finding along the way. There is a part of us that only shines when we look outside ourselves. God's passion is bent toward the service of the lost. God's mercy is reckless and profligate. It is a prodigal passion, and our visions of salvation are measly by comparison.

God's celebration is by no means limited to the theological doctrines of salvation of souls; God seeks to heal and us the whole person, body and mind and soul and strength. Nor is God's party time limited to a certain class of people. As Tim 1 puts it, the grace of our Lord overflowed. In the end all are invited to the part check our superiority at the door and join the dance.

When you have reached out and tirelessly worked to save what has been lost, you too are invited to rejoice with God, for you too are found. May it be so. AMEN