

The Relentless Love of God

Luke 15.1-10

FUPC

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Have you ever been lost? For the most recent generation, the answer may be “No, I’ve always got my GPS and Google Maps! How can I be lost?” But for the rest of us, we could all probably remember a time before GPS when we had absolutely no clue where we were and how to get to where we wanted to be. For me, Boston and Manila are two cities where I never thought I’d find my way home. In both those cities, the streets are pretty much like a bowl of spaghetti. And so, of course... I stopped and asked directions and most of the time that got me to where I wanted to be but not always.

On our recent trip to Europe, we were a little lost in Florence and we asked maybe four different people how to get back to the train station. And we got four different answers. We made it, but not without a lot of walking and a little bit of anxiety that we’d miss our connection.

I’ve watched children who are lost in a crowded place, lost in a sea of adult legs, and panic sets in when they realize that Mom or Dad are not around. They don’t know where they are. They don’t know where they need to be. They don’t know how to get there. And finally a kind security guard or adult stoops to comfort them and protect them and make sure they’re reunited with their parents.

Part of being lost is feeling invisible and vulnerable. Few things make us feel small and insignificant as when we’re lost in a strange place. Like we don’t matter very much. And sometimes, to be honest, I get that feeling of being small and insignificant when I stand under the stars on a clear night and realize that I’m tinier than a speck of dust in relation to our world, our solar system, our galaxy and our universe with it billions upon billions of stars and planets... and how could I possibly matter or be important?

There are other kinds of being lost than just geographical. Some people lose their way in life. They get side-tracked by bad friends, or poor choices, or short-sighted goals, or addictions and obsessions. And they end up wandering around in circles going nowhere and finally coming to a dead end.

Some people feel lost because everything familiar around them is changing and they don’t know how to cope with the new situation or experience they are having. The new literacy is digital literacy... knowing how to operate a computer, a smart phone, an ipad, having a Facebook account, or Twitter or Instagram. I’m one who pretty much feels lost with some of those programs.... But I’m pretty happy to enjoy my privacy and probably won’t change just to join the digitally literate club.

When churches change their worship style or traditions from familiar and comfortable to new songs, new instruments, new experiences of emotional expression it can feel like they’re lost in unfamiliar territory and they long for the good old days when they knew all the songs by heart.

Some people feel lost and invisible because they’ve grown old and feel like they don’t matter anymore. And some of those beautiful people have so much wisdom to share but there’s no one who will take the time to listen or even ask questions. No one visits anymore and so they can feel forgotten and alone. And so they hold their memories in a special place known only to them, and when they die, their memories will die with them.

Feeling lost and alone... that’s what leads us to our Scripture reading today and a day in the life of Jesus when he talked about the relentless love of God for people who feel like they don’t matter anymore.

In the passage we read, Jesus is surrounded by people who are “lost”, the tax collectors and “sinners”. These people are desperately hungry to hear what Jesus has to say. The tax collectors were hated because

they'd sold out to Rome against their own people and enriched themselves at the expense of their neighbors. They were considered traitors and though they might have been wealthy, they had lost the respect and friendship of their families and society in general. It was a high price to pay. The "sinners" were an assortment of people who had made poor choices, lived on the dark side of life and cut corners, using people and being used. They were the people we'd warn our children to stay away from. Don't get too close, don't hang out where they hang out, keep your distance.

Jesus was like a magnet for these people. He didn't turn his back on them. He didn't condemn them or judge them. In fact, he sought out their company. He attended their parties, visited their homes and was labeled a "friend of sinners" which was not a compliment. The people who gave him this label were called Pharisees. You know about them, right? These are the religious ninjas who have it all together, keep all the rules, pray loud prayers and give generous donations to the poor, but it was more to be seen and admired than to help the poor. The Pharisees judged Jesus for his choice of friends and wondered how anyone who hung out with sinners could claim to be sent from God? For them, God was as offended as they were... and their image of God has persisted through the years right down to today. When we judge others for not being as holy and upright and honorable and generous as we are, we can become 21st century Pharisees. Jesus called them on that attitude by telling three stories.

These three stories are about something or someone being "lost" and then being "found" and finally in the end... they all end with a party of celebration.

The first story is about a lost sheep. A shepherd has 100 sheep and 99 of them are good. They're obedient, they don't wander off, they stick together and they enjoy the security and love of the shepherd. But one of the sheep has a mind of its own and wanders off one day and gets lost. The shepherd always counts his sheep and knows always if one is missing or not. Does it make sense to leave the 99 sheep and go looking for that one rascal sheep that wandered off? Jesus asks this question. "Which one of you..." and the answer is "no one". Because it doesn't make sense to leave 99 sheep just to go find one sheep. After all, it was the sheep's fault, right? He deserves to be lost for making the choice to leave the flock. So he gets in trouble, serves him right.

But this is no ordinary shepherd. This is the "good shepherd". Jesus says God is like the good shepherd, who leaves the 99 to go looking for the one. The 99 aren't going anywhere... they'll still be there when he gets back. It's the one lost sheep that occupies the attention and energy and heart of the shepherd. And then, when the shepherd finds the sheep, he carries him home and throws a party because now his flock is complete and he just has to celebrate. Jesus point? God is like that Good Shepherd.

The second story is about a lost coin, a penny. Not worth much, not like losing a \$100. She knows she had it and now can't find it. She turns the house upside down trying to find it. Its an enormous expenditure of energy and time to find something that really isn't worth all that much. Again Jesus asks the question, "Which one of you..." and the answer is "No one." Because a penny just isn't worth all that effort.

Yet the woman persists and finally finds they penny. She's so thrilled and full of joy and gratitude that she organizes and party and invites all her neighbors. Note that the party probably costs a lot more than the value of the coin she had lost. But she's the happiest person alive at that moment because she found what was lost and she just has to celebrate. Jesus' point? God is like that woman who found her lost coin.

The final story is about a lost son, we call this the parable of the Prodigal Son. You all know the story. A boy demands his inheritance from his father, leaves home, lives a superstar life gathering lots of friends

and status...until the money runs out. He ends up feeding pigs and sharing their trough because he's starving. And then he decides to go home. As he nears his home, his father is waiting and watching. Is this a worthy son? No, but to the father, the son is everything. Does this make sense? No it doesn't. He made his own decisions and was selfish, wasteful, mindless, inconsiderate, presumptuous and stupid. Yet can you see this old Dad, watching the road every day to see if his son was coming. And one day, he spots him and with robes flapping, sandals kicking up dust he runs to embrace his lost boy. Imagine the tears of joy this old man shed as he hugs his kid. There's only one thing to do... throw a party like you've never seen before. He has to celebrate! He said, my son was dead and now is alive, he was lost and now he's found. Jesus point? God is like that father who watches and waits to embrace his child who was lost but now is found.

Who do you identify with in these stories? With Jesus? With the Pharisees? With the tax collectors and sinners? Because we are all in these three stories somewhere. How does God treat people who feel lost? In relentless, illogical, unbounded love, he goes in search of them. God is always searching. How does that make you feel? These stories are about what God thinks of you! God thinks that you are worth the effort to search out, find and bring home. If you ever doubt your worth or feel down on yourself, read Luke 15 and see how you fill the heart of God with desire for communion and fellowship and connection. Jesus told these stories in reply to the criticism of the Pharisees about how he was wasting his time and energy on people who were not worth it and didn't deserve it. Jesus' point is that these are exactly the people he's looking for, the people he came for, the people who need his loving, unconditional acceptance.

Where do you think Jesus would be if we were to look for him in Hilo today? I think Jesus might be found in the dark streets and scary places of our town where people are gathered who feel pushed to the edges, forgotten, left out and lost. That's where Jesus would be. In another place, Jesus said that when we look into the eyes of these people, we are looking into his eyes. When we feed them, we are feeding him. When we clothe them, we are clothing him. When we offer them shelter, we are offering him shelter. He so identifies with these whom we label as "lost" that he takes on their identity and pain.

Surely, our mission as a church has something to do with embodying the unconditional, overflowing, gracious and relentless love of God for people who feel lost. Who are in trouble, who feel invisible, forgotten, hopeless and who live with despair.

A woman called our church this week. She had had to vacate her apartment with her 7 year old son and was living in her car. She wasn't looking for money or food, but just a safe place to sleep. She had a job but no family and no friends who could help her. So she called our church. Maybe she called many churches. I made some suggestions and tried to put her in touch with some folks who I thought might be able to help her. I prayed for her.

But I wondered after that call... what would Jesus have done. It seems what I had to offer was so little in comparison to what she needed. And what does God expect of our church in Hilo with our long history, almost 150 years, of showing compassion, generosity, and grace to those who come looking for acceptance, a listening ear, a safe place to sleep, food to eat. Is there something more we could have done? Is there something more we should be doing? These are serious questions that go to the heart of why we exist and what will justify our continued existence. I hope you'll give some serious thought and prayer to these questions because our future depends on the answers we come up with. And if you have any ideas.... I'm all ears. Amen.