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## Seeking What is Lost

Luke 15:1-10

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 11, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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Some things that are lost will eventually be found. Just in the last few weeks, NASA found a lost spacecraft, known as the Stereo B, with which it had lost contact since October 2014. Almost two years floating freely in the cosmos. The team on the ground never gave up on their missing link in the air. They could have given up and thrown in the towel and moved on to create other aircrafts but Stereo B, the Solar Terrestrial Relations Observatory craft, was too valuable. We will seek what is lost if it is of value to us. The spacecraft was lost but they wouldn't stop till it was found. NASA could still do their work but without Stereo B something was missing from their scientific team. They weren't completely whole without it. Like a family might do when a child goes missing in a store or a theme park or a beloved pet never returns home, NASA did all they could to seek what was lost. They didn't know if they were going to find the spacecraft but that didn't stop them from searching. Maybe the truth is in the searching anyway as a revelation of how much you really care because there are never guarantees of finding what is lost. Maybe it's the seeking that really says something about who and whose we are. Notice that my sermon title is not "finding what is lost" but "seeking what is lost."

We may seek and never find. Here we are on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11. Think about what was or who was lost on that memorable day in this country. Two World Trade Center (WTC) towers, the Twin Towers, never to be found again, lost, and only remembered in the dust of their rubble. Almost 3,000 people were killed either in an airplane, in the WTC towers, or at the Pentagon. Out of the 2,606 people caught in the WTC towers or surrounding area, only 20-25 of them was pulled out alive from the debris. Supposedly, there are 1,116 missing victims whose remains have never been found. You may seek and never find.

This puts a different twist on what it means to be lost. In our gospel lesson, one commentator notes that the Greek verb for "lost" (*apollumi*) refers not only to losing something, but also to causing or experiencing destruction (cf. Luke 4:34; 17:27-33). There's a double meaning—"lost" is something you do and something that happens to you. The television drama *Lost* that follows the survivors of a crash on a South Pacific island perhaps is an example of this. It tells not only what happens to survivors after they are lost because of the crash, but also details past events that continue to haunt their lives (Lois Malcolm). The trauma of this drama, of this lost-ness, is the focus. Of course, this drama affects the one who is lost but also the one who lost a precious sheep or coin or family member.

The global financial services firm, Cantor Fitzgerald, whose New York headquarters were based on the 101st and 105th floors at One World Trade Center, experienced one of the most devastating losses on 9/11. They lost 658 of its 960-strong workforce, two-thirds of its NYC staff. Some things, some people, lost will never be found. All of the emergency personnel who hit the streets and towers and rubble seeking the lost, the hurt, the stranger and friend, never found everyone. This is why finding the one sheep out of one hundred, or the one coin out of ten, or the one son out of two, brings so much joy because in losing something you once had, you once held, or you once loved, you lose your joy, but in finding what was lost, as in the two parables today, there's the restoration of joy and maybe that's where some of you find yourself today—in need of finding joy again. Who's really lost then?

What about those who never find or are never found? What happens to them when their lives burn like the 99 days it took for the fires at Ground Zero to be extinguished completely? In the losses and devastation of that memorable day, we not only lost human lives but perhaps our national innocence—"Oh, that could never happen here. That only

happens in the uncivilized parts of the world.” Walk the streets of Paris today, known as one of the most romantic cities or “La Ville Lumiere,” “the City of Light,” and if we were to give a name to what we see it might be ‘lost innocence.’ Heightened security, everywhere, even for Duke football games. Something has been lost and we will never find that romanticized past of safety, even if it were only an illusion in the first place.

Yet some will seek the supposed lost innocence or a day when America was pure. But our children will never be the same. In the 15 years since the September 11 terror attacks, researchers have found that even events that unfold via media, such as the indelible live images of the collapsing Twin Towers, can also affect children hundreds of miles away. Dr. Robin Gurwitch, a Duke clinical psychologist researching in the area of children and trauma, said, “The events [of 9/11] changed children’s world view and their sense of safety.” “Children close to the event had significantly higher risk for mental health consequences. But mental health professionals also started to see children that were hundreds of miles away reporting new worries or concerns.” That is because we can press rewind and watch the images repeatedly and according to Gurwitch, “Many children were too young to understand that what they were seeing was the same footage being repeated...They thought more and more towers were falling.”

We are lost in more ways than one. For a little while, the Church gained more attendees post 9/11, but it didn’t last too long. They say the Church keeps losing members and the data shows it, but at the same time, I wonder if we are seeking any new members. Just as the NASA team searched and never gave up or the family members of 9/11 victims continue to press for answers and search for loved ones’ remains, perhaps salvation is found in the seeking.

The two parables reveal the active search of a shepherd and a woman. The shepherd leaves, goes after the one sheep, finds it, lays the sheep on his shoulders, rejoices, comes home and calls his friends together. The woman lights a lamp, sweeps the house, searches carefully for the one coin, finds it, and calls her friends together to rejoice. These two figures are bent on seeking no matter the costs, no matter who or what is left behind. The one is worth it and they are committed to seeking what is lost. Rick Lischer believes, “The ministry of seeking, as opposed to the ‘Let them find us on our website’ (or I’ll add ‘Let them stumble into this building’) theory of mission, is notoriously insufficient. Demographically based mission operations and virtual evangelism will fill up the building, but will such methods turn up the lost soul?” With this understanding, the focus of ministry is on the lost, the tax collectors and sinners, not on the churched. It’s not about those who are already in the spiritual fold, in the Chapel, but about those who are not here, those who are trying to find a home but no one will welcome them or worse, no one seeks them out. If you notice someone missing, give him or her a call. Seek them out—they may be hurting or they may just want to be reassured that someone cares. Not everyone wants to remain lost.

Search for those who are missing from the community because we are incomplete without them. Without that one, we will never truly be one, and we will never experience the communal joy jumping out at us through these gospel stories. This seeking is vital because by seeking the lost or what is lost you discover the heart of God, the heart that rejoices when something or someone is found. We seek in order to understand more fully the salvific work of God in the world. We seek in order to understand more fully what it means to love. Maybe it is love that is lost and that is what we need to seek more of and our seeking is a sign of how much we love. We seek just as we have been sought. We are ‘seekers,’ seekers of the lost, and some things that are lost will eventually be found and some may seek and never find. This is why the seeking is even more critical than the finding. The seeking reveals that we know God. The seeking reveals that we love. It’s not always the answers but the questions that bring us into God’s presence (Why do the nations conspire? Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?). The grasping, the faith seeking understanding, not that we always understand and have all the answers.

This is so important as a way to avoid an answers-only type of faith. “I only have faith when I receive the answers. I only pray to get answers not because I love God.” Do you have faith even when you don’t find? You may seek and never find or seek and never get the answer you desire. The parabolic pattern in both cases—for the sheep and coin—

is searching, finding, returning, and rejoicing. But to be brutally honest, this pattern is not a replica of real life in Christ. Perhaps it isn't supposed to be a mirror but a promise, a hope. Nonetheless, what happens when you seek and never find and aren't able rejoice? What happens when what you've lost causes you to lose your joy? What happens in a lost situation, when you may seem to lose faith and you seem to lose a part of yourself and God seems a distant memory?

We should acknowledge that not only is the seeking significant on our faith journey but there may come times when we are the ones lost, far from other sheep or coins, and we don't want to be found out. We don't want to search for ourselves or those parts of our lives lost in need of renewal and healing. We may prefer our lost-ness and want no one to find us. Somehow being lost feels safer than being found as a member of a community. No one can find us far away from home and that's how we like it. In this state, we may even experience a kind of spiritual dementia in which we lose our memory of God and forget what God has done for us and who God has been for us. It's a good thing, however, that God's action is not based on our memory, whether good or bad.

God lovingly seeks us no matter the circumstances. God never gives up on us. God is a seeker, like this shepherd and woman, which is why by seeking what is lost we reveal we know God. In our seeking we may not find what we seek or what is lost but as we seek we will find God on the searching road, or better yet, God will find us there! God is there because God seeks us out, seeking us that we may not be lost eternally. We may have forgotten from where we come, ultimately, but God doesn't forget those who forget. Those who are lost or have lost their mind are remembered in the mind of God. They are not forgotten. We will not be forgotten because God specializes in search and rescue missions.

God searches for what is lost, seeks till God finds. And God doesn't wait for us to come. God goes after us. I'm reminded of this in Psalm 23: "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life." The Hebrew can be translated, "surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life." God goes after us and when God finds us, God carries us home like the one who lays the lost sheep across his shoulders. The prophet did say, "and the government shall be upon his shoulder" (Isaiah 9) because Christ carried the weight of the world on his body on a cross to carry us home. We are re-membered by God through the broken body of Jesus.

In his book, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, John Swinton argues that nothing, including dementia, can "taint a person's unending loveliness." Human memory is not a prerequisite for God remembering us. God remembers us even when we can't remember God, even if we are lost or lost our mind. We live in the memory of God and it is God's memory that re-members, puts us back together "moves us from a state of fragmentation to one of wholeness in God: shalom." God makes us whole by finding us lost and restoring us to the fellowship, the *koinonia*, of God.

Through Christ, at communion, God gathers the lost pieces of yourself and knits them together by grace to find you at home, healed and whole, seated at his banquet table. As you take communion today, God in Christ finds you. You don't have to be lost forever. God seeks you and wants to be with you because God is Emmanuel, a God *with* us. And communion also says that God wants to be *in* you as you eat bread and drink of the cup. God wants to inhabit your bodies, your lives, so that you may know the joy of his presence all day long.

Some things that are lost will eventually be found, not just a spacecraft. "I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now..." You know how it ends.