

# “Have You Ever Been Lost?”

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Luke 15:1-10

The Stacey Pastors Workshop that we had here at the church reminded me of something I knew already about preachers, but I forget from time to time. We preachers are a little strange, a little quirky. We preachers are just flat out weird sometimes.

Let me tell you a couple of things that happened. Paul remarked to me after the first service how wonderful the singing was, and it was true. The sanctuary was nearly full, and I guess most preachers love to sing. We really sang at that service. I don't know if Paul noticed it or not, but during the responsive reading – preachers really like to read, too, and read loudly – it was as if every preacher wanted to read more loudly than the person next to him or her, and we did that. Just a little weird.

One other thing I noticed. You might be aware that we have copies of previous sermons back in the foyer. Those copies disappeared faster than doughnuts at Krispy Kreme when they put the light on for free doughnuts. It spoke to me, I guess, about something important about the preachers here. They came seeking, searching. Some of them, I promise you, were desperate. They were wondering, “Is this really what I want to do with my life?” and they came hungry and thirsty to hear what Fred Craddock and Barbara Brown Taylor had to share. So I'm grateful to you, as a part of this church, for making it possible for the Stacey Workshop to be held here. It was a good thing.

I guess at the same time that I say we preachers are weird I can say also that we're lost, because that is a common, universal experience. It's not a matter of *if* we will get lost but *when*, and not *how* but *how much* we will get lost, because there are varying degrees of lostness. I understand what it means to be lost, in more ways than one. Several years ago our General Assembly was at Pittsburgh. Suzanne and I had flown into Cleveland and rented a car at Cleveland. That was the easiest connection. We drove from Cleveland to Pittsburgh, and on the day we were leaving we checked out of the hotel and got in our rental car. Before we left I needed to go by the assembly hall where the meeting was being held and pick up a free “Chalice Hymnal.” That was the assembly when the “Chalice Hymnals” were used for the first time, and they were giving away free “Chalice Hymnals.” My parents wanted one, and I promised I would get them a “Chalice Hymnal.” Suzanne dropped me off at the

assembly hall and was waiting for me at a predetermined location.

Have you ever been in Pittsburgh? I think the guy who planned Pittsburgh streets was drunk. I mean they've got streets going everywhere, and from the assembly hall to where Suzanne was in this rental car I got lost. It was daytime, the sun was shining; I couldn't blame it on the clouds for not being able to tell which direction it was. I was so turned around I didn't know up from down. I saw a couple of Pittsburgh's finest. They were sitting in their cruiser parked by the curb. I had decided that if I got to the hotel where we were staying, I might be able to find my way back to where Suzanne was parked, so I asked them if they could give me a ride. You'll never believe what they were doing. They were sitting in this police car eating doughnuts. They told me they couldn't give me a ride. I understood. They were too busy eating doughnuts! I walked around the streets of Pittsburgh some more and finally rented a cab. I decided if the cabbie could get me back to the hotel I would be able to give him directions to where Suzanne was parked in the car. We pulled up to an intersection. I was about to tell him to turn right. Fortunately, I looked down to the left and that's where Suzanne was parked, so I paid the cabbie and got out of the cab and made my way back to the car.

Have you ever been lost? It is a universal human experience, and most of you have probably lost something at one time or another. Most of us fear that we might lose a wallet or a purse with all of that important information in it, but that's not the worst thing you could lose. About ten years ago, maybe even a little bit longer than that, I had a cousin named Scott. My aunt and uncle had gone to Alaska 30 years ago, maybe longer than that, to try and find their fortune in Alaska, and they did. They started a commercial fishing business, and they were very successful. My cousin, however, had some struggles. He struggled with drug abuse and some other problems, but it seemed as if he was getting his life straightened out. He had come back home to live with my aunt and uncle for a while. He had gotten a job on an oil rig, a good-paying job.

It was on a Halloween evening. My aunt and uncle had gone to some friends' house for a party. They left my cousin at home with candy for the trick-or-treaters. They lived on the edge of Kenai, Alaska. Behind the house where they lived was wilderness, just vast wilderness. They don't know if that's what happened to Scott that night. I guess we'll never know, but when they got home, Scott was gone. His car was still there. On his dresser was over \$600. But he was gone. His story was even on one of those programs, "America's Missing Persons" or something, and they thought they might get a clue or a tip from that; but all of this time and no word from my cousin.

Our scripture today has two stories of lostness. Bruce Larsen says, "The

parable of the sheep tells us about nibbling our way into lostness.” Shepherds will tell you that sheep can nibble their way from one tuft of grass to another, and if there’s a hole in the fence they’ll go through that hole, and they can’t find their way back. The story of the lost coin might be a story of carelessness, the way we all can be careless at times. But the context of the story is important to remember, the reason Jesus told the parables. In the scripture we read that he was eating with sinners, common people, and tax collectors. Tax collectors were hated. They weren’t IRS agents. They were agents of the Roman government. They cheated people. They collected more taxes than they should have. This fellow eats with these tax collectors and sinners, and so the Pharisees, we read, grumbled.

Let me depart from the text just a little bit. Do you have a grumbler in your family? Is there someone in your family who just constantly grumbles about nearly everything? Or are you the grumbler in your family? If you’re the grumbler in your family, let me suggest this: Put a cork in it! No one wants to hear your grumbling. That gets really, really old. And when we constantly grumble, we miss the joy in life. That’s what the Pharisees missed.

There is a wonderful saying that goes something like this: “The surest sign of the presence of God is joy.” Jesus said, “I came that my joy might be in you, and your joy might be full,” but the Pharisees missed that. They weren’t joyful, they were grumbling. That can happen to us in the church. A woman by the name of Mary Shertz says, “We settle for less grace because we are so busy judging others.” In other words, we want mercy for ourselves, but we want justice for everyone else. Do you see the difference? And when that happens we settle for less grace in our own lives.

It has something to do with an understanding of what it means to be church. One man said that when the church is filled with grumblers it’s like a nursery full of crying babies and quarreling children. As the church, we are called to be more like a bloodmobile - not something that waits for the people to come to it, but something that goes out among the people. But instead of a bloodmobile, we are like a Lost-and-Found-Department-Mobile. Have you ever seen the Lost and Found box at a school? There are all kinds of thing in there, some things that children shouldn’t bring to school. There is nearly always one glove. What happens to all of the other gloves that are lost? There is often a sign that says, “To be Claimed by Rightful Owner.” In the church we are called to go out and claim others for Christ. We’re not the Good Shepherd; we’re like assistant shepherds. We don’t own people. We go out to say, “You are God’s own person.”

Another story of lostness. When I was about 14 years old, I was spend-

ing the night with a friend of mine. My parents were out of town. We got a call the next morning that a little child had been lost. He had been gone all night. The parents lived out on a farm in the Ozarks, and this little boy, four or five years old, had wandered away from the farm house and gotten lost in the woods. My friend and I were members of a Boy Scout Troop. The community was trying to get everyone together to go out and find this little boy. I remember going out with my friend and some other boys, and we looked through the woods, hoping that we would be the ones to find the little boy. We didn't, but still there was, as you might imagine, joy just the same when someone did find him. They asked the little boy what he had seen while he was lost, and he said, "I saw men riding on horsies." In other words, he saw some of the very people who were looking for him, but he didn't realize he was lost. There's a lesson there somewhere, surely.

Another time I went to look for someone who was lost, but it wasn't a little boy. We lived at Stroud at the time. A fellow in the church told me that there was a couple in town that didn't have any church home. "I wish you'd go by and visit him, but, let me warn you ahead of time, they're pretty rough. The guy drives a truck. He's a rough old guy. I think his wife could probably whip *him*, that's how tough *she* is." I went to their house, and even before I got out of my car I could hear the shouting. It sounded like World War III in that house. I didn't know whether to get out of the car and go up to the door. I went ahead and walked up to the door. They were hollering and shouting and cussing, calling each other all kinds of names! I knocked on the door about like this - did you hear that? I hope they didn't hear it either. I decided that if they didn't answer the door no one was home, so I left. But I went back another time. I'll call the couple "Fred and Dorothy." I visited with them and they joined our church, and it changed their lives and the lives of their children. They had been found, not by me, but by God.

One more story of lostness. When I was a little boy, about the age of the little boy who got lost, four or five years old, my family went to Colorado. We were camping. We went hiking one day. I was having a great time. My dad was carrying me part of the way. At one point my brother and I were walking along beside each other, and he said to me, "I think we're lost." I watched my dad, and I could tell from the expression on his face that he was worried. But, finally, he said, "Look over there!" and through the trees you could see the sun reflecting off of something that you normally wouldn't see in the woods. You couldn't see our car, but the sun was reflecting off the bumper of our car, and my dad knew that we had found our way back. As I think about that now, what's interesting to me about that experience is this: As long as I was with

my dad, it didn't matter to me where we went. It was all right.

Do you understand the lesson there? As long as we're with God, it doesn't matter where we go. We can be here in this church in Tulsa; we can be in a church in Spencer, Iowa. Wherever we go, it doesn't matter as long as we're with God. The Pharisees missed this joy in their life.

In a few moments, we are going to come to this communion table and, as Carol said in her prayer, once again Christ will eat with sinners. That's Good News! That's about as good as it gets. The only thing that might be better is this: We have a shepherd who doesn't wait for us to come to him. We have a shepherd who looks for us. We don't have to repent first. Neither the sheep nor the coin repented, but still, the one who claimed them looked and searched for them.

I have shared with some of you before that when I go to bed at night I pray the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. Instead of saying, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters," I say, "You are my shepherd, I shall not want."

Think about what that means. If you realize that God is your shepherd, you don't want for anything.

You make me to lie down in green pastures;  
you lead me beside still waters;  
you restore my soul.

You lead me in paths of righteousness  
for your name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the  
valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;

for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff - they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in your house forever. Amen