

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
“Someone’s Looking for You...Who are You Looking For?”  
Luke 15:1-10  
II Corinthians 5:16-21

It was a moment of sheer terror, followed by a moment of overwhelming gratitude. As the day had begun there was no way I could have anticipated what was going to happen. The year was 1988 and Cindy and I had taken our two children, ages five and one, with the youth group from Pampa (that’s Pampa, Texas and not Tampa, Florida) to the Texas coast for a retreat. It was break time and so all of us headed down to the shore. The waves, though slightly larger than usual were nothing spectacular...even though there was a hurricane somewhere out in the Gulf. Andy at five was trying to body surf with the big kids and Cindy was sitting on the shore watching everyone. So I took Katie, our one year old, out into the surf...and she loved it. I would dip her into the waves as they came rolling in and she would giggle up a storm. But then it happened. Without any warning I turned toward the Gulf and saw a wave about to hit us which was taller than I was. It slammed into us with the force of a truck. It ripped off my goggles and was ripping Katie from my hands. We were buried in the water. I could not see. And for a moment I knew I would lose her. It was a moment of sheer terror. I am still not sure how I held on...perhaps by only a couple of fingers in the strap of her suit. But the one I thought I had lost...I had back as we emerged from the froth, coughing but alive.

Have you ever had a moment of panic like that when you thought you had lost something so precious and valuable to you that you could not live without it? Maybe it was a child in a grocery store? Or perhaps it was your wallet with all the money you had in the world? Sometimes it is our keys and we know that we are locked out of the house and our children are inside. Maybe it is a dream, a house, a job...who knows...but have you ever been there and felt that sheer panic of losing what really matters to you? If you have then you can understand more fully the emotions Jesus was trying to tie into as he was telling the two stories that we read this morning. The first story is about a shepherd who loses one sheep out of a hundred and went in search of it. The people listening would understand this image...for often sheep were communal property. They belonged to the entire village and so the shepherd was responsible for the welfare of many and so each sheep counted. Shepherds would literally risk their lives to find the one that was lost under their care. The second story was about a woman who lost a single silver coin and went to look for it. While one coin may not sound like much, for Judean peasants it might mean the difference between having enough to eat or going hungry tomorrow. So the woman is willing to sweep the dark and dusty room until she finds it. Everyone listening could feel the pain of the loss and the joy of the recovery.

This realization then brings us back to the question, “Why was Jesus telling these stories?” For as we have learned over the years Jesus never just told old stories in order to pass the time of day. Jesus was a purposeful story teller. Well the purpose of telling the story was to

respond to the condemnation Jesus had received for welcoming and eating with sinners and tax collectors. This is where the story opens. Jesus is welcoming and eating with the wrong kind of people. As one commentator puts it many of the uber-religious types in Judea repeated the mantra that, "There will be joy in heaven on day when one sinner is obliterated before God." The understanding was that God had no pity on those who had lost their way and that God's love was reserved only for the holy. Jesus however had other ideas. He was offering a very different view of God; a view which would change the mantra to "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Jesus was eating with sinners and tax collectors because God love for them was so great that God would do anything...including sending God's own son into the world...in order to find them and bring them back.

My guess is that many of us here are feeling a bit uncomfortable with the whole language thing about sinner and tax collectors. Few of us today probably wander around saying, "Oh look, there goes a sinner." We are a non-judgmental lot and welcome anyone who walks through our doors. And in fact if we understand our Presbyterian heritage we know that no person is perfect, that we all sin, and we all need a regular dose of forgiveness. So what then are we to do with this kind of language and image so that it has any meaning for us? I hope what we will do with it is to return to the original understanding of sin...which is to lose one's way. Sin did not originally refer to a violation of the rules...instead it meant to get lost as one tried to follow the way of God. So often we have come to see the Bible and especially the Old Testament as merely a set of rules...here are the things you are not supposed to do. If you break these rules you are a sinner. The Bible actually offers us a different image.

God created us to be particular kinds of people leading particular kinds of lives...lives that showed the love, forgiveness, care and compassion of God toward our neighbors and our world. The rules were there merely to help guide us into becoming those kinds of people...kind of like rules of the road are there to help make us safer drivers. The problem was that when people ignored the rules they lost their way...they lost their way on becoming fully human. That is sin...to lose one's way in becoming fully human. Jesus' stories then make real sense. The sheep wanders off and gets lost. The coin (though I know it is an inanimate object) gets lost. They both lose their way and are not fulfilling the task for which they were created. The owners go in search of them because the lost matter. By telling these stories Jesus is saying all of those who have lost their way in life...lost their way in becoming fully alive human beings are loved so much by God that God will go in search of them in order that these people find their way into life.

With that in mind...let me ask my next to last question. How many of you know someone who has lost their way? How many of you know a friend, a colleague, a child, a parent, a brother or sister or a neighbor who is just lost in life? They cannot find their way clear to fully exercise the gifts they have been given? If you can then you know some of those whom God loves and passionately desires to bring back into the beloved community...back into a church community where they can begin to find their way again. Which brings me to my final question

of the morning. What then are you doing to help find them and bring them back so that heaven will party down?

I realize that with that final question I have just crossed a very clearly defined line within Presbyterianism. The line in Presbyterianism is that faith is private and we are to allow each person to simply find their own way as they see fit. But that is not what the story tells us. God loves all people so much that God goes in search of them...and if we believe the Apostle Paul, we are the ambassadors who are called to do this work for God. Paul understood that part of the role of those who are walking the Way of being God's people as best we can are called upon to continually be seeking and inviting others to journey with us. This understanding is at the heart of our second Core Value, Reaching. Here are the words we use:

***Reaching:** We affirm the words of the Gospel of John that "God so loved the world." We believe therefore that the love God has offered to us is not our possession, but a gift that we are called to give away. This belief calls us to reach out to those who are hurting, lonely, and marginalized in order to tell them the amazing story that they are loved and cherished by God. This reaching is also an invitation to come and be part of our compassionate community.*

These words then offer us our challenge for the week. We are to be those whom, on behalf of God, go to those who have lost their way and invite them to be part of the beloved community in order that they find their way to fullness of life. So here is the challenge...how am I seeking and inviting someone I know has lost their way...in order to help them find life.