

A Still More Excellent Way
Luke 15: 1-10

When I was about seven I was in the Sunday School here and it was led by Ted Parsons. Ted had a cabin in the woods out in West Part. He was a lumber man and owned a lot of land out there, so it was natural that he would take the Sunday School out there for a picnic at the end of the school year. While the hamburgers were cooking we kids were free to roam around, so my friend, Elinor, and I went for a walk in the woods. When it was time to eat we could not find our way back to the cabin. We were lost. It wasn't that we had purposefully left the group. We just wandered off a bit and gotten lost. Being lost is not a nice feeling. To this day I harbor that in my heart and have no desire to go into any woods unless the trail is well marked. Ted, I called him Uncle Ted, found us and all was well. I suppose we weren't far away, but I remember that incident as if it were yesterday.

About 6 years ago a member of my parish in Chester decided that at age 70 he would walk the entire Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine, a distance of more than 2000 miles. He did it successfully, but he happened to be hiking in the Maine woods just a day or two after a lone female hiker was reported missing. I was following his blogs, so knew about all this and knew that the state of Maine had search parties out looking for her. She had evidently stepped off the trail for some reason and got disoriented. A hunter found her remains the following spring. Every time I think about her, and also about her husband who was traveling as her support person in a car and was to meet her one evening at the end of her day's hike, and how she never walked out of the woods at the designated spot.....every time I think about all that..... I get almost physically sick pondering how he must have felt when she did not appear, pondering how she must have felt when she could not find her way. She did not deliberately get lost. It just happened.

So here we have the story of the lost coin. Now I have read that story again and again and of course I just always connect that with how I might feel if I displaced my glasses or even lost a few coins out back somewhere. I would hunt for them, but I would also know that it was not a matter of life and death if I never found them. Life would go on pretty much as it always did. Reading that passage again, however, and looking further into its meaning I have come

to think differently about it. You see, the coin that the woman lost was worth at least the amount of a day's wage. To her it meant food and shelter. Life in Palestine for a working person could be difficult and hard just even to eke out a living. Very little stood between a person and real hunger. Something worth a day's wage was a matter of life and death.

Add to that another fact, as it appears in the reference book I studied. (Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, p202). It is a more romantic reason! "The mark of a married woman was a head-dress made of ten silver coins linked together by a silver chain. For years maybe a girl would scrape and save to amass her ten coins, for the head-dress was almost the equivalent of her wedding ring. When she had it, it was so inalienably hers that it could not even be taken from her for debt." It mattered a lot, this loss of a coin. Now the coin did not know it was lost, but the woman did. And it was no little thing, so it explains her joy upon finding it and why she threw a party to celebrate its return. For her it was a joy about finding her most precious possession, something with a value way beyond money. If it was from her wedding head-dress, the rest of the 9 coins would have not been complete and the head-dress would not be of value, either.

Notice something else.....the lost coin was totally helpless. The lost sheep could at least let out a bleat, but the coin lay there in a dark, unlighted house with only a small window, and the floor was beaten earth covered with dried reeds and rushes....no voice to utter, no means of movement, no way to escape.....dependent completely upon being found by someone who cared about it greatly.

So now this parable from Jesus takes on greater meaning, because we all know about getting lost. Sometimes we get lost when driving in the city, sometimes we get lost when taking the wrong turn in life. But sometimes, too, we get lost through no fault of our own....we just get lost. We can take a wrong turn in life....not because we meant to, but because we did. We can feel lost ...not because we meant to but because something happened that was hurtful or degrading or just plain rude. We can feel lost when we lie in a hospital bed or when a beloved person dies and we wonder how life can go on, if life can go on. We can get to feeling of no worth.....lying there on the floor and unable to get up by ourselves.....physically

or mentally or emotionally. Being lost happens – not because we meant to have it happen, but because it just did.

What we need to learn from this parable is that there is someone/something/God who cares enough about us to hunt for us through thick and thin until we are found. Not only that, we need to learn also that there are others....the nine other stones in the headdress, the 99 other sheep in the flock,...who just really are not the same without that other sheep or that other coin. You learn that when you lead a choir.....if a singer we counted on was not there the whole piece did not go right. (I remember once when I led the choir, even though all our singers were there, we got messed up. We were singing a fancy arrangement of AMAZING GRACE. In the middle of the anthem it changed keys and – after an organ interlude – the choir needed to come in on a new note. Well one of our singers came in on the wrong note. It wrecked the whole performance. We had to stop and start anew....right in the middle of church...right in the middle of a solemn section of music. And do you know what the words were when we finally got back on track and began again.? They were “we once were lost but now am found”. Oh, so appropriate.) See what I mean about being lost.....the other sheep, the other coins, the other choir members, they needed that which was lost.

In reading this parable I learned something further that matters. It is one thing to be lost. It is an entirely other thing to be left without that which is lost. You can think about the Shepherd. He had invested in those sheep. They were his livelihood. He needed all of them, not just the 99. If you think about that woman, she needed the coin because it meant food and it meant the basic important thing in her life...her head-dress that signified for her the great meaning of her life. If you think about the choir, they need all the people to be with them or else it is just not so good. If you think about church, without everyone being part of it things just are not the same and it is a great loneliness to carry on without them. If you think about your own life, you need others who matter and who love you....otherwise you carry within you a loneliness that never can be filled. If you think about God, stop to realize that God may just seek us as much as we seek God.

So think of these parables. Remember how it feels to be lost; and I dare you to tell me that you never ever have had a feeling of lostness at one time or another of your life. But stop

also to consider how it would be for the others in the headdress, in the sheepfold, in the choir, in the church, in the world.

And who did Jesus mean when he told of the Shepherd and the woman who sought and sought and sought and eventually found that which was lost? It means our Creator God. I don't know how you interpret all this; but I tell you that for me it means God, in the loving, compassionate person of Jesus Christ.

There was a church in Corinth long ago. It was a new church. It was founded in part by Paul, but also founded in part by some others who were trying to tell people about Jesus. They did not all agree on everything. How could they? Some came from Africa, some came from Palestine, some came from Greece, some came from Jewish backgrounds, some came from Roman and Greek and gentile backgrounds and knew nothing about the God of Jesus. Corinth was a busy seaport. It was a place – a melting place- of people. Getting settled in as a new church was exciting, but still they had to sort out who they were and what they were doing. It was difficult; and you know that people would have stepped on the toes of others in the process of forming the church. It could not be otherwise....people being people...people needing to feel a part of something....people feeling lost for whatever reason.

And Paul saw all this and wrote about it in his letter in the 12th Chapter of First Corinthians, trying to address the lostness of that church and its people. He ended that letter with the words I quoted in the bulletin today...."And I will show you a still more excellent way." They lead directly into that famous chapter 13 used often in church scenes... Indeed one of the most famous chapters about love that appears in the Bible. Part of them are these words.....words for the sheep in the fold to remember.....""love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not insist on its own way; it does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

This church knows how to live this excellent way. Sometimes it does forget, though; but it does know how. I saw it when I did the Sullivan wedding two weeks ago. I saw it in those who came to help make sure the wedding was nice for the people involved.....to clean the church before the wedding, to run the elevator for the guests, to provide a pitcher of water for

those in the wedding party who were waiting for the time to go by, to stand at the door and welcome strangers, to stand upstairs at the doorway to the sanctuary to make sure the wedding party was not interrupted when their march began, to then stay afterwards and pick up the scene – move the pulpit back, douse the candle flames, turn off the lights. I saw it when I did the funeral at the Senior Center for Theresa St. Martin, a 92 year old Roman Catholic who loved her Southamptn Protestant neighbors, and a goodly number of our people took time out of their day to attend and support her family. I see it in the tremendous work that Luanne Archambeau and her helpers do in creating and maintaining the food pantry.

May I suggest that nothing else matters here ever..... but to live as Jesus instructs. “Love the lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and your neighbor as yourself.”

The town of Southamptn looks up to this church to help them find the way.....in their lostness and their problems, their loneliness and grief.. needs to know that this church has been saved and redeemed by a God who cares enough to have sent his son to show us the way. Yes, we are lost, too sometimes. Maybe we are lost right now. You know the answer. It is to be open to let Christ in to the soul of this church....to forget ourselves, to lean upon God’s presence, and to believe with every fiber of our beings that God cares enough to save and guide us all the way.

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