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## *A Banquet for the Lost and Found*

**A Sermon by the Rev. Buddy Crawford**

**Proper 19, Year C**

**Gospel: Luke 15:1-10**

When my mother was getting me ready to start the first grade she decided that I needed new shoes. On Saturday morning she took me and my three younger siblings to a department store downtown. The Children's shoe department was on the second floor at the back of a store that was as deep as a city block. Once the shoe clerk finished fitting me with my new shoes and started helping my sister, I turned my attention to the rest of the store. I saw a jungle of chrome and glass round racks hung with clothes reminding me of weeping willows ... it was a jungle begging to be explored.

My mother's distraction with my siblings provided the opportunity for me to wander beyond the shoe department. I liked pushing through the hanging clothes to step into the center of the racks where I could look up through the glass tops and see the underside of displays, the glittering chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Zigzagging my way from one rack to another, carefully avoiding other shoppers, I finally pushed my way through a rack of suits, arriving at one of the store's walls. Being too short to see above the tall racks I lost my bearing, quickly realizing that I did not know where I was or how to return to my mother in the shoe department. Too embarrassed and scared to cry out, too timid to ask for help, I backed myself into a rack of clothes and quietly waited.

It wasn't long before my mother came down an aisle, my infant brother in one arm, my other two siblings in tow behind her. Mom's face was filled with worry and exasperation as she searched each aisle, but I did not move from my place. She soon spotted me and the fear on my face. Rushing to me she knelt down and scooped me to her with her free arm and I knew that I was safe and I will never forget that experience.

I wore my new shoes to Sunday school the next day to show my teacher Miss Doris. She was a tall woman with gray hair and kind eyes, a consummate story teller and teacher, and our class loved coming to church to be with her. The walls of our classroom were lined with pictures of bible stories ... but the most prominent picture, hanging just behind Miss Doris's chair, was of the Good Shepherd, a parable she often referred to in our discussions.

Our class followed the same weekly pattern; Miss Doris telling a bible story while we followed along in our work books, coaxing us to share what we thought. Some of my classmates said something every week. I rarely said anything, too caught up in the details and characters and not quite sure how to make a connection between my life and the stories.

But the Sunday after my trip to the department store I had something to share. Before we stood in a circle to say our prayers I shared my experience of being lost. Miss Doris listened and smiled and nodded and when I finished she simply pointed to the picture of the Good Shepherd behind her head, and I got the connection.

At times our familiarity with the stories and parables of Jesus causes us to forget their radical portrayal about the nature of God and humankind. The parables we hear today might be the most radical in Luke's gospel. As Luke sets up the stories we find the usual diverse crowd gathered around Jesus. There are the Pharisees and Scribes, common sinners and tax collectors along with Jesus' disciples. The Pharisees grumble about Jesus "welcoming" sinners and inviting them to his dinner table - a shocking disregard of religious propriety - no good Jew would eat with a ritually unclean sinner. While our translation says Jesus "welcomes" sinners, it is possible to read it as Jesus "seeks out" sinners, Jesus seeks out the lost, all those who are losers in the eyes of the "spiritually" successful Pharisees.

In response to the grumbling Jesus tells three stories. We only hear two of them today. The third - the parable of the prodigal son - we heard during Lent. But all three stories are about someone or something that is lost being found.

In the first parable a shepherd with one hundred sheep notices that one has strayed away and is lost. The shepherd does something economically risky, something some might say is foolish; he leaves the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to search for the one that is lost. The sheep that are safe and accounted for are left to the perils of straying away or being attacked by predators - but the shepherd will risk them all in order to restore the lost.

Sheep are noisy when they are together, crying out from hunger or danger, but when alone or lost they will become silent. Scared of being detected by a predator, a lone sheep will burrow its way into the underbrush becoming paralyzed with fear. A shepherd who goes seeking a lost sheep is in for an arduous task; it requires looking into every hiding place, calling out in hope that the sheep will overcome its fear long enough to respond to a familiar voice. Even after being found, the shepherd will often have to force a sheep out of hiding and carry it back to the fold.

Likewise, when the woman discovers she has lost one of her ten coins, she lights her lamps and turns over the furniture, sweeping out the dust bunnies and cob webs until the coin is found. The faithful shepherd and the diligent woman search tirelessly until they find their valued possession. For every sheep that wanders into the wilderness is in effect a dead sheep and every lost coin is a dead asset - and it is to the dead that Jesus brings new life.

These two parables are remarkably radical - for the lost sheep is already part of the flock, the lost coin is part of the woman's treasure. In these stories, everyone is an insider and all are included in the search to restore the whole. Jesus describes a world in which all that is lost must be restored. When there are only ninety-nine sheep the flock is not complete, when the purse contains only nine coins it is not fully accounted for, so every stray sheep and lost coin must be found and returned so that all is made whole.

The radical inclusion offered in these parables challenges the Pharisees' requirement of observing traditions and customs to determine who is acceptable. Jesus' words remain challenging if we have expectations of a certain moral character, or requirements of a particular theological belief, or any prerequisite that the lost must attain in order for them to be found. Lost sheep and coins can do absolutely nothing except to be found, as surely as God's grace is given as a free gift. Any response or action flows out of the gift of being found. The only expectation of Jesus is that every time a lamb is restored or a coin is found the community will come together to rejoice and celebrate.

In American culture, where doing and earning and being rewarded for our efforts is prized and esteemed, these parables remain challenging. But the life of Jesus, and the way of life Jesus offers us, is challenging and a paradox. Just as Jesus loses himself in order that God might "find" and resurrect his life, our imitating Jesus means following him into lost-ness and death, never relying on our efforts to be found, but trusting God's fidelity and diligence to seek us out.

Life presents us with distractions that may lead us away from the flock into the wilderness. Infidelity and divorce, illness and death, economic down turns and career setbacks, doubt and despair, beckon us to find a nice secure thicket in which to hide, where we forget the safety of the communal sheepfold. But the faithful shepherd is constantly seeking and finding wayward sheep, lifting up weary bodies and bearing them back to the fold where his friends gather to rejoice and celebrate.

About six years ago I was at home with my parents and had the opportunity to visit with my former Sunday school teacher Miss Doris. Well into her 90's, she was stooped and frail, but with the same kind eyes and sharp mind I remembered. I asked her about the picture of the Good Shepherd and why that story held such importance for her. She asked me if I remembered her aged mother who lived in their back bedroom. I nodded. She then told the story of losing her mother to a disease that left her an invalid for more than 35 years.

Almost every day for 35 years Miss Doris bathed her and clothed her and fed her. She loved her mother, clinging to the memories of the vibrant woman she once knew. She said caring for her mother taught her about herself and provided insight she was able to share with other caregivers. But there were times when the burden of care giving was overwhelming. There were times when these feelings led her into the wilderness and the story of the Good Shepherd reminded her God was always seeking her out, it reminded her that she was always both lost and found. And then Miss Doris said a prayer for me just as she had done every Sunday when I was 6 and 7 years old.

Jesus declares to those who gather around him, Scribes and Pharisees, sinners and tax collectors, everyone who will listen , that we are all lost and we are all found and that our rejoicing in our lost-ness and found-ness brings hope to the world.

I have a confession to make. While it is true that Miss Doris was a great storyteller and a kind teacher, we probably loved her most because she believed that every class needed to end in a celebration. That meant we received some of her homemade chocolate chip cookies or a slice of her cream cheese pound cake with something cold to drink every Sunday morning. So we ate and celebrated being together.

So here we are this morning at the Cathedral of St. Philip, one of God's many places where the lost and the found gather together. We've heard our sacred story and will soon say our prayers. After that we will set the table and prepare a banquet of bread and wine. It's a banquet for all of us, the lost and the found - so let's celebrate.

Amen.

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