

LOST AND FOUND DEPARTMENT

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32 & 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

The story of the Prodigal Son puts me in mind of other lost and found stories in my life. Most vivid in my mind is the time Carol and I lost our then 4-year old daughter, Kate in a very crowded Faneuil Hall, Quincy Market, Boston. Our youngest, Susan was in the stroller and our big girl Lucy was all of 7. Looking at some items along a L shaped counter, we suddenly realized that Kate, who had been with us a few seconds before, had disappeared. We looked all around and called for her – no Kate. Carol took Lucy and I took the stroller and we split up in opposite directions to search. “*Kate*,” I yelled, as I started down the corridor. “*Little blond girl with a pink coat?*” someone said; “*she went that way.*” A trail of concerned people kept pointing me in the direction the little girl with blond bangs and a pink coat had run crying, until I soon came to my daughter who someone had wisely stopped and put on a counter to wait for her parents to catch up to her. 90 seconds of terror that still makes my heart pound 21 years later.

We have searched for a lost cat, lost dogs, missing household items of all descriptions, missing tools and lost socks seemingly every time we do a clothes’ wash.

Most recently I lost my keys. A couple weeks ago we were taking a 3-day ski vacation. We had just arrived at the mountain, gotten ourselves outfitted in boots, gloves, etc. and were heading to get our tickets when I reached into my pocket and realized my keys were missing. I knew I had them when I locked the car, so of course we meticulously traced our steps. We both thought we’d heard something clink on the heat grate when we entered the lodge, but hadn’t felt that we’d dropped anything, but no keys there either. In the service center, which doubled as a lost and found department the people couldn’t have been nicer. No one had turned in any keys. But an employee generously got a lantern, helped me lift the heavy heat grate and look underneath – still no keys. Oh well, we could take a taxi back to where we were staying, retrieve our other set of keys, come back and get the car and our stuff. An extra expense and a pain in the neck, certainly, but not a major disaster. But we might as well ski first and check the lost and found one more time before we booked the taxi. When I went back to the lost and found at lunch-time they recognized me right away and said they had my keys. They had fallen on the grate, but not down it. Someone had picked them up and taken them to a cashier, who brought them to the lost and found 5 minutes after we left. The service manager had gone out and searched for us, keeping an eye out for us all morning.

I think of the Church as a kind of *lost and found department*. But hold that thought, we’ll come back to it in a few minutes.

Let’s go back to the parable of the Prodigal Son. Our Gospel story starts with the Pharisees grumbling, “*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*” So Jesus told them a series of lost and found parables. He began with the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd left his 99 sheep to find the one that was lost and carried it home on his shoulders rejoicing. Then Jesus told the parable of the woman who lost a coin and swept her whole house clean looking for it, rejoicing with her friends and neighbors, when she

finally had it back safely in her pocket. Then Jesus told the parable of that younger son who treated his father with such contempt, went far away, wasted his inheritance, became destitute, ashamed and hungry, finally returning to his father to beg to be hired as a servant. Oh how his father rejoiced to have his son back!

At this point we have to ask, “*did the Pharisees get it?*” How could they not? Who has not lost something and searched for it? What a stunning image of God as the one who searches for the lost and greatly rejoices when it is found. I suspect that even those hard hearted Pharisees softened somewhat in their judgment of those obvious sinners who lived outside the Jewish Law that Jesus welcomed into his fellowship, when they thought of them as the lost ones that God sought diligently to recover.

But then Jesus snuck in a 4th story. The story of the older brother has the same structure as the other 3 – lost, sought after and found. Triply lost the elder brother goes off in a pout. He denies his relationship with his father – “*I worked for you like a slave all these years.*” He denies his relationship with his brother, “*this son of yours...*” (*no brother of mine*). And he refuses to join in the celebration. When he realizes that he is missing his father seeks out his elder son and pleads with him to re-enter relationship. “*Everything I have is yours,*” he told him. “*We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and has been found.*” The elder brother is clearly, in his own way, lost, loved and sought after by his father. But then the story is never resolved. We don’t hear how it ends. Jesus leaves the tension of uncertainty to force the Pharisees to deal with the story that is most pointedly about them. They had never thought of themselves as lost and yet, they like the elder brother, had denied the celebration of the wayward son’s return, when they grumbled at Jesus for welcoming sinners.

Jesus told the 3 mini-stories *on the slant* in order to bring the 4th story of a lost person who has long since lost any sense of being lost, to get past the self-perception of the insiders of the congregation who never think of themselves as lost. (Eugene Peterson, *Tell it Slant*, p.97)

Have you ever felt lost? I don’t mean having to run into the 7-11 to ask for directions because something’s wrong with your GPS, but existentially lost – where you have lost equilibrium and direction in your life. Perhaps you went through a painful divorce. Perhaps you went through or are going through a time of unemployment. Maybe you failed at something you thought you could accomplish? Perhaps you have been stuck and at a dead-end. Perhaps some situation or tragedy shook your confidence and you no longer felt like yourself anymore. Perhaps you had gone in the wrong direction and weren’t sure how to get back. Have you ever felt lost?

I think of the Church as God’s lost and found department. We are all in some ways – lost. Whether as the stray lamb that had to be rescued, or a wayward child who had a long, long journey home, or like an older sibling who, though never doing anything flagrantly wrong, hardened your heart and judged others who don’t seem to measure up, or perhaps you’re still struggling to find your way... all of us are in some

way lost. We are all lost and in process of being found in our loving Father's seeking love.

That's why the Church is a lost and found department. We're not a department full of found items sitting on a shelf waiting to be reclaimed by their rightful owners. But we are all lost persons who have been found anew in our Lord and Savior's love. As many times as we lose our way we are sought after and found in God's great love for us. And more than that we are a community of the lost and found. We are welcomed into community, into relationship with one another and a living relationship with God. We are invited into *Communion*. The Church is a lost and found department.

The Apostle Paul writes that "*if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new!*" (2 Cor. 5:17) That's what it's like to be found. Not only are we no longer estranged and lost; we also become part of something new. We become part of a new creation. We are no longer to regard anyone from a human point of view, but from God's loving perspective. More than that we are invited to help manage God's lost and found department. Paul tells us that we are *ambassadors* for the very one who sought us out to find us. We share his message of reconciling love that transforms us from someone who is lost to someone who is found.

The good news is that God is always seeking us out, longing to carry us home on his shoulders. When we are apart from his love God waits longing for us to return. He calls us back to ourselves, back to him, back to our brothers and sisters, back to community. In his love we are found and made new. In his love there is a new creation. And so, welcome to God's lost and found.