

God is Where the Lost Things Are

Luke 15:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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There's a woman who has called me at the church office with some regularity over the last decade or so.

She calls from two or three different phone numbers and uses a handful of pseudonyms. I have a file full of the various names and numbers she's used. I'll call her Jane.

The stories she tells vary. She's dying or mortally ill. She has to get somewhere far away for a surgery and needs gas money. Her kids are terrible and mistreating her. Her grandkids need food. She needs a hotel room. She needs a thousand dollars, but she'll settle for fifty.

This has been going on for the better part of a decade. I suspect many churches have a story or two like this.

I have helped Jane out on occasion. As a matter of policy, our church only gives out grocery cards, never cash. She doesn't seem to remember this.

At any rate, Jane phoned again a while back. No sooner had I said hello than she had launched into a litany of afflictions and grievances and need. She barely paused for breath.

I listened wordlessly until she got to the ask. Eight hundred dollars, if I wouldn't mind. I politely reminded Jane that we don't give out cash. If a modest grocery card would help, I could try to arrange that.

She paused, before blurting out angrily, “Well, you’re not very nice.” And then she hung up.

I sat there for a while pondering this exchange. It’s never nice to hear that someone thinks you’re not nice.

But of course, I know that Jane is not well and that she struggles in many ways and for many reasons. She has almost certainly faced obstacles in her life that I have not, indeed that I can barely imagine.

I wish I could write Jane a cheque for a thousand dollars and make her life better, but I know that her story is a lot more complicated than that.

What stuck with me was the implied expectation in her protest. Pastors should be “nice.” Churches should be “nice” places that do “nice” things for people like her.

They shouldn’t ask questions. They should be sort of like a benevolent ATM machine with unlimited funds.

Jane is not the only one who has expectations like this. I suspect many people come to church hoping for a “nice” experience.

Something uplifting, warm, encouraging. It would be nice if the pastor would tell a joke or two, but nothing too off colour. The sermon should be practical and relevant. It should make Christian faith more intelligible and provide a bit of inspiration for the week ahead.

There should be opportunities for social interaction with like-minded people and opportunities to do good things in the community.

It should reinforce the general view that we are nice people doing nice things for a nice God who smiles benevolently down upon us for our efforts.

Well, Jesus was called many things, but “nice” was not among them. Jesus said many beautiful and liberating and inspiring things.

But he also said hard things to people. He could be blunt and direct. He confused and provoked and annoyed regularly. He spoke in riddles and he told stories with the wrong people in the starring roles.

The lepers and prostitutes and prodigals and outcasts were drawn to him like moths to a flame, while the learned and the respectable often kept their irritated distance.

(Aside: I was looking at the cross on our wall this morning. Some of you will know is a cross that Dennis Neufeldt made as part of the preparation process for his baptism. I’m so glad that it is being displayed today.

But as I was looking at it, a pretty simple thought occurred to me. Nice guys don’t get crucified. Jesus wasn’t crucified because he was nice, but because he spoke the truth to powerful people, because he exposed the deep sickness at the heart of the human condition.)

In today’s parable, Jesus is approached by a bunch of respectable religious people who are upset that he isn’t hanging out with nicer people.

And in response, Jesus tells a story about lost things. A lost sheep who the shepherd leaves the rest of the flock to go and find. A lost coin that a woman turns the house upside down until she finds.

This is what God is like, Jesus says. This is who and how God pursues his children. This is why *I* have come.

He says, “There is greater joy in heaven when one sinner repents, who turns around, who reorients themselves toward God and God’s purposes, than over ninety nine righteous persons who ‘need no repentance.’”

I think we can safely interpret Jesus as being a little sarcastic here in this last part.

Who, exactly, are these ninety-nine who need no repentance? Well, Jesus knows his Scriptures very well.

Psalm 14:2-3:

The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind
to see if there are any who are wise,
who seek after God.

3 They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse;
there is no one who does good,
no, not one.

Ecclesiastes 7:20:

Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever
sinning.

He is not telling the religious leaders that they are righteous and have no need of repentance. He's not saying, "I'm so pleased with you all. Just keep hanging on with all your righteousness while I go find the stray sinners."

He is holding up a mirror to them and saying, "You, too, are lost in your own way.

Our second reading this morning illustrates this with the well known story of the Apostle Paul.

He is writing to his young protégé Timothy and begins with his own story.

"It's incredible," Paul says. "I was judged faithful and appointed to the service of Christ, even though my story is far from flattering!

I was a righteous and zealous persecutor of the church. I was a blasphemer—I spoke of God falsely, I was convinced that people of the Jesus Way were heretics to be eliminated.

I was a man of violence. I was there, cheering righteously on, at the stoning of Stephen!

I was, Paul says, the worst of sinners. And then Jesus knocked me down, struck me blind, and overwhelmed me with the grace and love that led me to see clearly.

Paul was an educated man. He was trained in an elite rabbinical school. He knew his Torah. He was an expert in the ways of God. He lived a life of singular devotion to God and God's ways.

And yet he was totally lost.

Now, I know that many of us don't particularly like this language of "sinners" and being "lost." Maybe it brings up all kinds of unpleasant baggage from overly zealous evangelical sermons in your childhood, I don't know.

It certainly isn't language that squares with the orthodoxy of our cultural moment which says that our highest goal ought to be to pursue personal authenticity, to be true to ourselves.

I know that even in the church, some have little patience for Jesus telling us that we are lost and that we are sinners in need of repentance.

But Jesus not only knows his Scriptures very well. He knows human nature very well. He knows us better than we know ourselves.

He knows that to be human is to miss the mark. We consistently fall short of our professed ideals, whether due to ignorance or weakness or deliberate and culpable transgression (or, more likely, all of the above).

All of us, no matter our colour, creed, politics, or ideology, act in ways that are inconsistent with our stated ideals. This capacity is lodged deep within each one of us.

Christianity has always taught, however imperfectly, that human beings are both saint and sinner at the same time.

We bear the image of God and carry the legacy of Cain. We soar to heights of love and beauty while at the same time are perpetually bent inward on ourselves. To be human is to be conflicted.

At its best, this theology of human nature ought to make us a bit more humble and less willing to throw stones because we see ourselves in the failings of others.

This is a saying that is true, Paul says and worthy of full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim 1:15).” Which is all of us.

We may not all lose our way as sensationally as Paul did, but each one of us gets lost in different ways at different points in the journey.

But we are not grovelling serfs at a severe master’s door; we are dearly loved children, created for good works, to bear God’s image to the world.

We are not miserable wretches who must be punished, but God’s cherished possession who are showered with grace, mercy, and patience, in the hopes that we will turn to him.

What Paul tells Timothy, what Jesus tells grumbling scribes and Pharisees who can’t understand why Jesus is hanging out with the riffraff rather than upstanding religious people like them, is that what is lost can be found.

No story, no human life is beyond rescue. No one has wandered too far to come home.

Perhaps you're still struggling with this idea of being "lost." I came across a beautiful essay this week that may help this concept of "lostness" land in your life. It did for me.

It's from an essay on this passage from Luke by Debie Thomas who I quote with some regularity. The essay is called "On Lostness." and I want to read a portion of it:

But what does it mean to be lost? It means so many things. It means we lose our sense of belonging, we lose our capacity to trust, we lose our felt experience of God's presence, we lose our will to persevere. Some of us get lost when illness descends on our lives and God's goodness starts to look not-so-good. Some of us get lost when death comes too soon and too suddenly for someone we love, and we experience a crisis of faith that leaves us reeling. Some of us get lost when our marriages die. Some of us get lost when our children break our hearts. Some of us get lost in the throes of addiction, or anxiety, or lust, or unforgiveness, or hatred, or bitterness.

Some of us get lost very close to home—within the very walls of the Church. We get lost when prayer turns to dust in our mouths. When the Scriptures we once loved lie dead on the page. When sitting in a pew on a Sunday morning makes our skin crawl. When even the most well-intentioned sermon sucks the oxygen out of our lungs. When the table of bread and wine that once nourished us now leaves us hungry, cranky, bewildered, or bored...

Maybe the most scandalous aspect of these lost and found parables is not that I still get lost. Maybe what's most scandalous is what they reveal about the nature of God. God the searcher, the seeker, the determined, dogged finder. If Jesus's parables are true, then God doesn't hang out where I assume he does.

If Jesus's parables are true, then God isn't in the fold with the ninety-nine insiders. God isn't curled up on her couch polishing the nine coins she's

already sure of. *God is where the lost things are.* God is where lostness reigns. God is in the darkness of the wilderness, God is in the remotest corners of the house, God is where the search is at its fiercest.¹

God is where the lost things are. What a great way to put it. When I read that line on Tuesday, I instantly thought, “Well, there’s my sermon title.”

God is where the lost things are. And if God is where the lost things are, that means the same should be true of us.

I have two fairly basic convictions when it comes to the role of the church. The church should be a hospital for the wounded and broken down. For the “Janes” of our world.

It should be a refuge for those who have been shattered by circumstance, by their own choices, by the crushing weight of sin and failure and frustration. It should be a loving, healing embrace to those who have known little of love.

If the church is perceived to be a place where nice, well-dressed people come to hear nice words and sing nice songs about a nice God, but where the sick and the broken and the unwell are not welcome, then the church has failed spectacularly in its vocation.

My second conviction is that the church should also be a place where we seek to tell the truth. About God, about the world, and about ourselves.

The church should be a place where we can honestly face both the ugliness of our sin and the staggering beauty of our humanity at the same time. It should be a place where hard truths are told, where we regularly come face to face with the suffering God whose love drove him (and drives him still) into the forsaken places.

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2356-on-lostness>

It should be a place where confession is made and absolution offered, where love, in the deepest, truest, and most demanding and liberating sense of the word, is embraced and extended.

If the church is perceived to be a place that shrinks from inconvenient truths about the human condition in favour of being inoffensively “nice,” then, again, the church has failed spectacularly in its vocation.

The church should be quite a bit more than “nice.”

People like Jane need far more than “nice,” even if it’s what they say they want. They need the embrace of a community. They need the dignity of a summons to what God, in Christ has called them to be.

They need to confess their sins and to be forgiven. They need somewhere to lay down their burdens and to find rest for their souls. They need their heads to be lifted toward hope’s horizon.

They need to be lost. And they need to be found.

This is what each one of us needs, even the nicest and most respectable among us.

May God help us to be this kind of church. May God help us to listen to Jesus even when he says hard things about who we are and about what we need.

Amen.

