

Lost and Found

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

January 21, 2024 AM Sermon

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Luke 15:8-10

I want to take a bit of an unusual approach to tonight's sermon. I want to begin by telling you a rather long story of something that happened in my own life years ago. I want to tell you this story because, in a strange way, it helped open up the parable of the lost coin for me, and maybe it can do the same for you.

Years ago, on a fateful Friday in December, I had my wallet stolen. It was stolen from the change room of Calvin's gym. I used to play basketball most Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings and I would shower at Calvin after my workout. While I showered, I used to leave my wallet in my gym bag by my locker. I did this for years, and it had never been a problem, but on one Friday I came out of the shower, started to get dressed, looked for my wallet and realized it was gone. I spent about 3 minutes desperately checking and rechecking my backpack hoping that I'd somehow missed it, but pretty soon reality hit me, and I raced to my office to start canceling credit cards.

On the way to the office I realized I had a bigger problem than my lost credit cards. The credit cards would be a hassle, but far worse than that, my green card was in my wallet! This was the card that got me in and out of the country. Without it, I could leave the US, but I probably wouldn't be allowed to come back in. I wouldn't be able to go home for Christmas! My children couldn't see their cousins! And it would take me months, maybe more than a year to replace the thing. I might be exiled from the true north strong and free for a whole year! This was very bad!!!

It was only 20 minutes from the time of my shower to the time I got the credit card company on the phone, but by that time the credit card lady told me that the thief had already spent a couple of hundred dollars at Meijer. In fact, as I was on the phone with her, just after she had cancelled it, she told me that thief tried to use my card again, this time at a BP Amoco station. This made me mad, but it also made me curious. The only BP Amoco station in town was on the Beltline near the Knapp Corners Meijer. Now I knew which Meijer the crook had shopped at, and I knew exactly where the crook was right at that moment! I jumped in my car and headed north. I didn't know what chance I had, but I wanted to try to get my stuff back!

I went to the BP station first. There was no crook there of course, that would be too much to hope for, but I thought, maybe the crook, frustrated because he couldn't use the card, had thrown it in the trash. I started digging in the trash containers. Now at the time I wasn't thinking so much about this, but in retrospect I can imagine how this must have looked. Here I was, a middle aged man in decent clothes rummaging around in a garbage can full of old food and old Kleenexes. Not something that screams out mental stability. To make matters worse, these receptacles are right beside the gas pumps, so all these well-dressed professionals were standing around giving me uncertain looks as I fished around. I started to explain myself, but it was hard to explain and when I started, they looked like they didn't really want to know. It was humiliating.

But at that point I didn't care, and sure enough in one of cans, about half way down I found my Blockbuster card (which gives you a sense of how long ago this story happened) and lo and behold just below that, there was my green card, with my little face smiling back at me. I did a little dance and let out an exclamation when I found it. Now the people pumping gas were really nervous. The only thing more alarming than a man digging in the garbage right beside you while you pump gas, is someone digging in the garbage, pulling out things and then celebrating. I might have said to them, "Rejoice with me I have found my green card!!" But I doubt they would have joined in. Later I went to Knapp's Corner Meijer to humiliate myself by digging in their garbage, and there in one of the cans outside the front door I found the wallet itself and just about all the rest of my cards. I even found the receipts for the Christmas presents I'd bought. There was much rejoicing in the Jonker household that night.

"Therefore the Kingdom of heaven is like a woman who has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin." In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." My wallet episode

opened this parable up to me (and hopefully to you) in several ways. First it shows me something about intensity and urgency. I remember the urgency and intensity of that morning very well. Everything else got put aside as I searched for my wallet. I was completely focused. And in this parable Jesus shows the same sort of intensity and urgency in this woman. When she loses her coin, she sets her mind on finding it again, she lights her lamp and sweeps the house carefully, diligently. And she sweeps until she finds it, not until she gives up, not until she gets tired, until she finds it. The intensity I felt as I searched for my lost wallet, the intensity the woman felt as she searched for her lost coin, that same intensity burns in the heart of God as he pursues the lost in this world. Jesus tells this story to show to us the deep desire God has to restore broken, lost and miserable people. Anyone who is lost in any sort of way is a deep concern to him. Your wandering child. My lapsed childhood friend. Your wayward sister. God's desire for them is not passing and occasional; it is intense and urgent. And when anyone of these lost folk comes back its cause for a party.

Another way in which my wallet episode opens up the parable has to do with humiliation. When something really matters to you, you are willing to make a fool out of yourself in order to achieve it. I have a natural aversion to digging through public trash cans, and I'll bet you do too. It's gross and dirty and my Mother would not approve. But when I was after something that really mattered to me, I was willing to dive into the dirt, I was willing to publicly humiliate myself in order to find what was lost. And of course, this is God's story too. Jesus leaves the throne room of heaven and comes down to this dirty earth. And when he arrives, he endures all the indignities of human existence, the dirt, the pain, the mockery, the abuse, the humiliation. Jesus suffers great humiliation in his search for the children he loves.

Jesus is actually enduring humiliation the moment he tells the parable! I mentioned that this parable was told to Pharisees who were scoffing at Jesus for spending time with prostitutes and tax collectors. They thought he was hanging around with garbage. In effect they were rebuking Jesus for digging through the trash. But their sneering looks didn't stop Jesus. Jesus was so intent on recovering those broken people, that he was willing to dig in the mess of their lives. He was willing to be humiliated, for their sake, and for our sake. Jesus may find the sin of this world dirty and appalling, but his love for the people of this world is so strong that he's willing to endure it, to take it on.

I don't just learn about what's in God's heart in this parable, I also learn something about what God wants in my heart. God's heart burns with an intense concern for the broken and the lost, Jesus wants some of that concern in me. When Jesus tells this story to the cynical Pharisees who are turning up their noses at Jesus' low-life friends, he's not just telling them that God cares about he lost, the implication is that they should be concerned for the lost too. Some of that intensity, some of that passion for lost people that lives in God, should also live in us.

But when I remember the intensity and focus and passion I had when I searched for my wallet last December, and I try to remember a time when I had that kind of passion for lost people, I have to admit, something is lacking there. I have to admit that my green card inspired an intensity of concern that I don't always feel for people. I suspect that most of us are the same way. Not all of you. Some of you have children who have wandered away from faith, and you have felt an intensity for them that matches and surpasses anything I felt in December. But many of us have never felt that deeply, and this passage is calling us to change.

Thinking about that, notice how, in the parable, the woman does two things to find her lost coin, she lights a lamp and she sweeps carefully. Those are the two actions that come out of her desire for what is lost. Lamp lighting and careful sweeping. I don't know if Jesus intended the parable to be broken down quite this way, but when I consider the lighting and the sweeping, it strikes me that both those steps are needed in finding and reaching lost and broken folks in our neighborhood, whether rich or poor; whether living in a million-dollar condo, or living on the street. At LaGrave, we've lit a lamp. We're here. Our lights are on. Twice every Sunday morning and every Sunday night, the gospel is proclaimed. The lamp is lit. But while the lit lamp is nice, it's not much good unless you also sweep carefully. The lamp is a useful tool, but it doesn't do the looking for you, it simply gives you the ability to start looking. And so I pray that for me and for you, some of that intensity for the lost, some of that passion for the wandering may live in us. We've lit the lamp; I pray that we will also have enough passion to sweep carefully: to see our neighbors, really see them in their complexity and their humanity. And then to connect with them through care, through conversation, so that maybe God's grace will sweep all of us lost coins together into his kingdom.

There is one more way in which my wallet episode opens up the parable for me. Only this time it's not because the stories are similar, it's because they are different. When I looked for my wallet, there was a balance between the things I did in my search and the value of the lost object. I think you can all probably see why I did what I did, when it was my wallet and my green card at stake. Given the value of what was lost, the search was worth it.

But things are different with the lost coin. Scholars all agree that the coin lost was a denarius, which was worth about a day's wage for a laborer. So, to put it in modern terms, maybe a hundred and fifty bucks. That's a decent sum of money and well worth a search. But notice! The woman does more than search, when she finds the coin she invites all her friends over for a party. "Come rejoice with me!" Now, I have always wondered, how much does it cost to throw a party for all your friends. 150 dollars perhaps? If you're paying for the wine and the food, maybe more than that. Doesn't this woman run the risk of blowing most of the recovered money on the celebration!?

And it's not just this parable; you might ask this question about all three parables of Luke 15. Each of these three parables ends with a party, and in each case the party seems less and less likely. In the first parable, the Shepherd throws a party for all his friends because of the recovery of one sheep. Even that seems like a strong reaction, but at least it seems possible. In our passage, the party for the one coin seems strange, like an overreaction. And in the final lost story, the story of the lost Son we have the strangest party of all, the son who insulted and abandoned his dad is welcomed home with a ring, a robe and a fatted calf. Here is a party so unlikely that the elder son comes home and yells at his father: "What are you doing! He's not worth it!" The excitement of the woman at the recovery of her lost coin, the grace of the Father at the return of the lost Son, goes beyond human sense, beyond human calculation. The intensity of the search and the price paid by the searcher goes beyond the value of what has been lost.

It's here that the parables tell us the depth of God's love for us. God loves us with a passion that doesn't make sense. The Lord of the universe is willing to come to earth not just to search for us, but to die for us. The Lord of the universe is willing to endure the humiliation of being hung naked on a cross? For me? In a universe nine billion galaxies wide, who am I? Who are you? We are speck. What do we count for? What are we worth? And yet the Lord of the universe gives up his life for you and for me. In this incredible gap between our small selves and the immense price Jesus paid for us, in that incredible, incomprehensible gap, we see the depth and the height and the width of God's everlasting love. In the gap between our small selves and Christ's enormous sacrifice, we see the intensity of God's grace. The Lord of the universe has come to search for each one of us. He has lit the lamp, he is sweeping every corner, so that he might bring all his children home to his eternal party.

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