

Found
Based on Luke 15:1-10
Aspen Community UMC
September 16, 2007

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We spend a lot of time at our house looking for things.
Anybody else do that? What do you look for at your house?
We spend a lot of time looking for Andrew's reading glasses, or my car keys.
Reading glasses and car keys seem to have minds of their own,
and they get up from wherever they are and hide themselves,
perhaps to keep us alert.
There seems to be a way we humans are always looking for something:
the fountain of youth, the Holy Grail -
and everything from mythology to expeditions come from our looking for things.

We search for God.

This reading for today is about God searching for us.
Edward Beck in *The Joy of Being Lost and Found* writes that
there is a strange paradox about the Christian life.
Often, it's more about being lost than found.
It's more about feeling incomplete than whole.
It's more about feeling excluded than included,
because many of us live in those places most of the time.
That's why being found is at the heart of who we are,
because we all get lost in the desert, even when we're part of the fold.
And we all need someone out there, willing to come looking for us.
We are always in the process of trying to turn back,
return, or to find our way home again. And it's a struggle.
Think of the writings about this. "Amazing grace how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost and now am found."
People testify to it in songs and poetry.
The process of being lost and found is how we move towards wholeness.

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This week I was with a group of clergy and on one of the evenings we watched the movie,

“On Golden Pond” with Henry Fonda and Katherine Hepburn.

There were two instances where this “being lost” or “being found” happen
in a way that drew these characters into greater maturity.

The first time was when Henry Fonda, who plays the cantankerous
retired professor Norman Thayer, now almost 80,
goes to pick strawberries.

He was in a wooded area that he had been in many times,
but he is much older now, and he gets turned around and confused, almost dizzy.

He looks up into the tall trees and becomes overwhelmed, and frightened -
lost in a place that was so familiar, but lost none the less.

Disoriented for a while, perhaps few moments - that seemed like an eternity.
He ends up stumbling out of this forested area near his cabin with no strawberries,
arriving home almost breathless to Ethel of his fear and his relief.

Later in the movie 13-year old Billy Ray
has been left to stay with Norman and Ethel for a month.

Norman and Billy Ray become friends.

Norman has taught Billy to fish. They have learned to trust one another.

They are searching for that big fish.

They go out to a place called Purgatory Cove.

It is getting dark and they are not able to navigate the boat through the rocks,
and they wreck the boat. Norman falls off the front of the boat

And Billy Ray jumps in to rescue him. Billy Ray helps Norman get to a rock
and hold onto it, and then Norman helps Billy Ray get his grip on the rock.

They hold on there until Ethel knows by now that something must be wrong
and comes with help – surmising they have gone to Purgatory Cove.

But during this time before they are found,
they find a place of bonding that neither had known before.

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This movie shows us a couple of ways in which we
as people can be lost - and found.

Being lost and being found is a time for deepening our experience of life.

Soren Kierkegaard, a 19th century Danish philosopher,
wrote about how we may go out on a religious quest.¹

There are different places or levels on this religious quest.

He says that the first place, or level, is the aesthetic level -
and it is about seeking pleasure in life.

It is a kind of dabbling in life, looking for what makes us happy.

The second level of life is the ethical level.

This is when one begins to take life a little more seriously,
and we go out seeking the good.

We might call the first level pleasure, the second level good.
the first level casual dabbling - the second level earnest living.

The third level, he says, splits off into two more areas.

He calls them Religion One and Religion Two.

Religion One is about seeking truth, where we yearn, where we reach out to find
this something extra we know is somehow a part of life.

So, we have pleasure, good, and then truth.

Then we may discover another place.

This place takes a little more effort,
and many discover this place through the scriptures.

This is where we experience the grace of God seeking us.

So, let's think about this, in the first three movements of this seeking into life,
at least as Kierkegaard is thinking of it,

we are out there looking for something – pleasure, good, and truth.

And then, in the process, or at least on down the line,

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something may happen, or something actually finds us.

And, that is the divine in search of us.

Kierkegaard calls this trust.

Like the bumper sticker that says, "Let go and let God"?

Or, it is like learning to swim, or learning to float in the water.

The water will hold you up if you let go and trust it to do so.

If you don't, you are likely to sink.

Sometimes the more you thrash around the quicker you will sink.

So, the fourth place in the quest,

is learning to trust something -

learning to trust the universe, to trust God.

It is not like seeking pleasure, or seeking what is good, or what is truth,

but to let go and be embraced by this mysterious thing we call grace.

It often happens in the midst of challenge.

In our gospel story for today,

Jesus is criticized for whom he socializes with, who he runs with, so to speak.

And, he responds with these parables, the lost coin, the lost sheep,

and if we kept reading, the lost son.

In these stories we catch a remarkable insight into the seeking nature of God. ²

There's an old, old story...

The phone rings and a little boy answers in a whisper: "Hello?"

The caller says: "Hi, is your Mommy there?"

"Yes!" "Can I talk to her?" "No!"

"Why not?" "She's busy."

"What about your Daddy, can I talk to him?" "No, He's busy."

"Well, is there anyone else there?" "My little sister."

"Is there anyone else there? Another adult?"

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“Uh, huh. The police.”

“Can I talk to one of them?” “No they’re busy.”

“Is there anyone else there?” “Yes, the fireman.”

“Can I talk to one of them?” “No, they’re busy, too.”

Caller: “Good heavens, your whole family is busy,
the police and fire departments are there and they’re busy!

What’s everybody doing?”

The little boy giggled and whispered:

“They’re looking for me.”³

Like the little boy being sought after in his own home,

G-d is right before us if we but know how to look, listen and feel.

We people when we are lost can be frantic in our searching for that which is lost.

And our reading today, reflects that, illustrates that.

We go in search of things, like Kierkegaard’s ideas about the quest.

That we first seek pleasure, and then we seek good, and then truth,
and when we have done that we may discover something coming full circle.

Remember those lines from T.S. Eliot near the end of *Four Quartets* In *Little Gidding*,

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

That is, we will have come full circle.

We discover grace, and grace is the divine in action.

Grace is the divine coming back to find us.

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And with grace is celebration.

Not necessarily for the coin that was lost or the sheep that was lost,
as the story goes – for they cannot know what it means.

The celebration is for the finder, and for those who are also there.

This is why we celebrate the joy of another –
because in the bigger picture - we are also a part of it.

Let's think of it another way.

Let's say an individual is in a process of psychotherapy.

- an opportunity for personal growth and integration.

And one of the things we do in therapy is to try and integrate
our experiences, so they will make more sense, or we try to work through

things that have happened to us -

things that keep getting in the way – things that keep us captive.

things we have trouble letting go of.

Psychotherapy is a little like being a shepherd herding sheep.

The sheep are all of our experiences –

some of which are good things that have happened. They don't seem to be the problem.

But then there are the things that we did that have had negative consequences,
or things that we may have been victim of that also have had negative consequences.

And let's consider those things to be sheep that are out there lost.

Until we go out there and round up that lost sheep – we remain somehow at odds with life -
somehow unable to experience joy - the kind of celebration that happens

when the lost sheep or the lost coin is found.

There is a wisdom that comes from reeling in those experiences -

talking them through and feeling the feelings that go with them.

Until we do that we are still at a loss for how to move on - something is still lost.

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This takes us back to Kierkegaard and his four steps of the religious quest.

We first seek pleasure, and then we seek good, and then we seek truth.

And then, we discover trust, not because we have found it - but because it finds us.

Our reading today is about this grace that finds us
and propels us into the mystery of this faith Jesus Christ gives us.

And in that found-ness, there is something to be celebrated.

Does it make tomorrow better than today? I think so.

Tomorrow, we might remember that we do not need to do all the searching.

We might consider some things in our lives that we thought unworkable,
might just turn out to be used another way.

In our meditations and in our reflection,
we might discover more times of being lost and being found.

Those times of being lost and being found, I believe, have helped us be more whole.

¹ Adapted from Carl B. Rife, *Bumper Sticker Religion*

² Ralph F. Wilson

³ Billy D. Strayhorn, *Finders, Keepers*