

The Wideness of God's Amazing Grace*

Proper 19C

Luke 15:1-10

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In our reading from Luke, we read part of the 'lost and found' parable trilogy. The final installment being the parable of the lost son. We hear of desperate searching for a lost sheep and a lost coin followed by joyful feasting once they are found. There are so many things in life that we can lose.

Recently, I was out shopping and dropped my phone somewhere along the way. As soon as I got home, I went straight to my computer opening *Google's Find My Phone* app. It pinged on my phone as being at the grocery store. The phone was found, and I celebrated with a hot fudge sundae.

If only there was an across-the-board app that would make it easy to find whatever is lost. But even if there was, it wouldn't work for those intangible things that we can lose. We can lose heart or our compassion. How many of us have lost our temper or our respect for someone? Maybe we have lost our way, lost hope, or even lost ourselves.

There are also many ways to lose something. Have you ever put something somewhere for safekeeping only to discover that you can't remember where that safe place is? We can lose something through our own carelessness by dropping it or pushing it aside. Sometimes we become deliberately lost, either hoping we won't be found or wishing that someone will look for us. And because life is life and some things are beyond our control, we can lose things through no fault of our own.

But there are times when we don't realize we are lost. We believe that we are right where we are supposed to be, doing what we believe we are supposed to be doing, and yet, we are lost all the same. In today's parable the lost sheep probably thought that the other ninety-nine were lost, because she was at the best clover patch ever. In the parable of the lost son, the son would totally deny he was lost when he demands his inheritance walking away from his father, only to find himself sleeping with the pigs after squandering it away. In the words of the great theologian Winnie-the-Pooh, "I'm not lost. I'm right where I'm standing. Unfortunately, where I'm standing may be lost." (Silverman, Sustaric, & Zaslove, 1991, May 17)

So many of us could say something similar, “I am not lost for I know where I am, but however, where I am may be lost.” We know we are at work, making money to put food on the table, doing “important work”. But is that a place where we become lost to our family? We know we are looking at our computer or phone screen believing we are connected to the world. But instead, do we become lost to our friends and the people around us because we isolate ourselves from life? On Sunday morning, we know we are sitting in a pew in church. But are we lost to hearing God’s call to us or lost to feeling his love for us?

In the year 1725 a baby boy, John Newton, was born in England. At eleven years of age John went to sea and was later pressed into the British Navy. He was rebellious, reckless, and drank too much. His wanton way of living led him to become a slave trader. A relationship with God was the furthest thing from his mind until his ship was almost lost at sea. Even then, it was many years before his feet turned to home and his heart turned to God saying, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.” At that moment, there was much rejoicing in heaven for John Newton had been found even though he had no idea he was lost. In 1764, he became an Anglican priest, later penning the words to the most famous and popular hymn ever sung- “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.” (Newton)

When we sing “Amazing Grace”, it becomes personal. The stanzas aren’t just words of a hymn; they are words in the autobiography of our lives. We are blind to being lost. We look around having no clue how lost we have become because we are stiff-necked, stubborn, egotistical, and impatient beings. The amazing thing is God loves us anyway. He mourns when we are lost and never gives up on finding us or helping us to find our way home. And when anyone finds their way home there is much rejoicing by God and the angels in heaven.

This radical love of God is the same love we are called to show to all God’s children. Even when, and perhaps especially when, we totally disagree on which one of us is the lost one. We are called to practice unconditional love that others may find totally crazy or even fool-hardy. We are also called to share the amazing grace we have received so that others will know the joy of being found even when they didn’t think they were lost in the first place.

Think about something material you have lost- your favorite pen, the last piece of chocolate, or whatever. Did you, like the woman who lost her coin, tear the house apart, sweep every nook and cranny until it was found? The more we want the object or how badly we need it determines the amount of time and effort we expend before we give up. And while we may eventually give up on trying to find our favorite pen, the good news is that no matter how we got lost, God never gives up on finding us and bringing us home.

Remember also your reaction when you found what you had lost. Maybe you didn’t throw a party, but perhaps your heart sang with happiness; maybe you cried out, “thanks be to God!”, or you did a little happy dance. Whatever it was, there was a feeling of joy at finding what was lost.

Finding what is lost makes us feel good. Helping someone discover the abundant, unconditional love of God has the angels rejoicing in heaven.

The coin in the parable or your favorite pen may not give one hoot about being found, but I bet the sheep did. Even if she thought the ninety-nine were the lost ones, being reunited with her family brought her joy. For the lost son, there was plenty of joy to go around for both the father and the son. Being found lifts a weight that we didn't even know we carried, leaving us feeling blessed. No longer feeling lost in the sea of humanity, being reunited with those we love, finding ourselves wrapped in the loving arms of Jesus- these are all worthy of a feast. A celebration of joy that what was lost is now found. The joy of knowing that we always have a place at the table no matter how many times we have turned away from it or didn't even know that a feast was just waiting for us.

At Christ's table, there is a place just for you as we celebrate together. No matter what we have done or haven't done, no matter where we have gone on life's journey, lost or found, the eucharistic feast is for everyone. The angels in heaven sing with joy. God smiles. The Holy Spirit dances, and Jesus holds his arms wide waiting to embrace you with a fierce hug. And that, my brothers and sisters, is indeed the amazing grace of being found.

Amen

The sermon title comes from a new hymn written by Jon Roberts- organist, choir master, composer, and friend

Works Cited

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