

February 26, 2023

The Gospel of Luke
LII. God Searching For Us
Luke 15:1-10

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

Fred Craddock, who was an excellent preacher and teacher of preachers at Emory, tells of playing hide-and-seek with his sister when they were kids on the farm. After recounting the official rules of hide-and-seek, he tells how whenever his sister was “It,” meaning the one who did the searching, she would always cheat while counting to one hundred:

Well, she started off honestly enough; she would say, “one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, ninety-three, ninety-four.” But I had a place under the porch and under the steps of the porch. Because of my size I could get under there, and I knew she’d never find me. “Ninety-nine, one hundred. Here I come, ready or not.” Here she came, in the house, out of the house, in the weeds, in the trees, down to the corncrib, in the barn. She couldn’t find me. I almost gave myself away, down under there just snickering to myself, “She’ll never find me here, she’ll never find me here.” Then it occurred to me . . . she’ll never find me here. So after a while I would stick out a toe. When she came by and saw my toe, she said, “Uh oh, I see you,” and she’d run back and touch the base three times and say, “Ha ha, you’re it, you’re it.” I would come out brushing myself off saying, “Oh shoot, you found me.”¹

And then Craddock the preacher, as opposed to Craddock the kid playing hide-and-seek, writes this: “*What did I want? What did I really want? The very same thing as you. Isn’t that true?*”² And then he leaves that question hanging there for us to think about. But his meaning is clear: what he and you and I want most is to be found.

But before we can be found, we first must do the much harder thing – which is simply to admit that we are lost to begin with, that we need finding. And that doesn’t come easily to most of us. We are raised up from the cradle to believe that we are the masters of our own destiny, the captains of our own fate. That our lives are what we make them to be, and no one else – we are large and in charge. Some of us are even able to keep up that particular illusion of self-sufficiency and self-determination well into middle age, or even old age if we are particularly stubborn. But most of us, if not all of us, get those illusions of being large and in charge over our lives knocked out of us eventually, and usually sooner rather than later. Like the opening line of Dante’s Inferno: “*Midway along the journey of our life / I woke to find myself in a dark wood, / for I had wandered*

off from the straight path.” Less poetically, these days we’d just say he was having a mid-life crisis.

But that sense of being lost, off-track, and of needing to be found is something we can find within ourselves at any age. Do you remember getting lost as a kid – how scary it was? I remember we moved to a new neighborhood just a few blocks from our old house when I was in elementary school. So there I was walking home from school that first day in the new house, but on an unfamiliar route, on unfamiliar streets, none of which seemed to go in a straight line. And I was lost and scared and needing to be found. I remember in high school, I was part of a group of friends helping the Kiwanis Club park cars before the high school football game. My friends left early, without telling me, and went into the stadium to get their seats. When I finally saw that they were gone, I went into the stadium to try to find them. I remember walking back and forth down by the cheerleaders, looking up at the stands and trying to spot them. But I couldn’t find them. And they didn’t, or wouldn’t, call out to me. And I felt lost and alone and needing to be found. I remember my mother in the months after my father died. My father was 6’4” and built solid as a linebacker – he was a large presence in that small house. But he was also a man large with love and laughter, which filled and overflowed that house. And then, suddenly, he was gone. I remember my mom kept TV’s on full volume at each end of the house – not because she was watching something important that didn’t want to miss even one second of, but because she was just trying to fill up the empty space my father had left behind. She was, for a good long while, lost and needing to be found.

So, what is your story of being lost and needing to be found? That moment, or that season of life, when suddenly you could see what you could not see before – that we are not as strong as we pretend, not as safe as we have imagined; more vulnerable to hurt and disappointment than we had hoped, more fragile and dependent in mind and body than we have previously considered. When we realized, at last and in a soul-changing sort of way, that when it comes down to this great drama of our lives, what we are really doing is mostly just winging it, ad-libbing our way through it as best as we can – simply because we are not as in control as we think. That we are at somewhat of a loss when it comes down to the big matters of living, and of dying – and that what we really need, most of all, is to be found. But who is out there looking for us? Who are we counting on to come and find us?

Biblically speaking, all of humanity speaking, this problem of our lostness goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden – to that moment when we decided we weren’t going to do things God’s way anymore, that we were no longer going to just trust that His way was best and that He had our best interests at heart. That moment when we said to ourselves that we were going to make our own decisions, choose our own ways, set our own rules and priorities and goals and values. The Bible says that the very moment Adam and Eve did that, in our place, instantly their eyes were opened. But not like that was a good thing – as in, “Eureka, at last I can see clearly the truth.” No, what it means by that, that their eyes were opened, is that suddenly they saw what fragile creatures they really were. Suddenly they saw how difficult and threatening life can be without God watching over you. Suddenly they saw how lost and alone life could be when once we have decided to ignore God, to think that we know better than God how to live. And Adam and Eve, overwhelmed by what they now could see – and this is the really pathetic part – well, the best they could think to do was to sew together some fig leaves to make some clothes.³ As if fig

leaves would ever prove sufficient to protect them from being lost and needing to be found. The same way we sew together our bank accounts and insurance policies and big houses and nice cars and social media friend status as if any of that was ever going to prove sufficient to keep death and disorder at bay. Lost and needing to be found. You know, like a sheep which has wandered from its fold. Like a coin fallen behind a chest of drawers, where no one can see it gathering dust.

Lost and needing to be found. That's where it all begins – the getting found part. It all begins, and can only begin, when we are ready at last to admit that we are lost and need to be found. That's where it all begins – being rescued, being saved, I mean. Because that is the very moment we become able to discern that there is Someone looking for us, Someone who wants – maybe even more that we do – that we should be found. God, I mean. Because that's what these two little stories Jesus tells about a lost sheep and a lost coin tell us about God – that He is in the business of searching out what is lost. In the business of finding it and bringing it home again, making it safe again and making it treasured again. In fact, in the Bible, God started searching for us the very moment Adam and Eve managed to get themselves so tremendously lost. Do you remember how that story continues? After Adam and Eve sin, and so get themselves lost and in need of being found, God comes down into the garden in the cool of the day to walk and talk with them, as was their daily custom. But Adam and Eve hear God coming and they are terrified because of what they have done. They have barely got their fig leaf britches properly adjusted before they are diving down behind a hedge, trying to hide. And do you remember God? Do you remember what God then says and does? He calls out to them, *“Where are you? Where are you?”* And then He goes looking for them, until at last He finds them.⁴ You could really say, at this point, that this scene basically sums up the whole of the Biblical story which follows, the whole of human history which follows – we getting lost and God crying out for us, *“Where are you?”* God searching for all His children who have gotten lost and are in need of being found.

That's why He sent us Jesus. What is the Incarnation if not God, having counted to one hundred, now coming down to the earth Himself to search us out and find us. What is His Word to us, the things Jesus said to us, if not a roadmap for us to help us get found? And what is His death and resurrection and ascension if not God creating a way out of no way – a way by which, once found, we can come home again to where we most belong, and forever stay this time.

Our God is a searching God. He's not just sitting up there in heaven, hoping we'll come to our senses and find our way out of the woods – He is down here daily, in the power and presence of His Holy Spirit, searching for us. Our God is a searching God. We talk sometimes – and, might we say, a little boastfully considering our true circumstances – about how we are searching for God, our personal spiritual journey, as if we had any clue as to where we are and to where we are going in the first place. But the truth is that it is not our search for God that really matters anyway, and not our spiritual journey which will get us home. It's God's search for us which matters, God's journey into this world to find us which is the only thing which can get us home. It's God in Jesus Christ, coming into this world to seek out and to find what is lost. To journey up and down all the hills and vales until He finds all the hiding places we have made. Like a shepherd, searching – and note this little adverb well – searching until at last he finds that lost sheep, places that found sheep tenderly upon his shoulders and heads home. Or like a woman turning her house upside-down until – and there it is again – until she finds her lost coin and returns it to her purse where coins belong.

It's God! It's His search for us which matters! The Good News of the Gospel is that we have a God who has come to this earth in search of us. And that He will not stop looking for us, calling out our name, until at last we are found. Until at last He has found us, rescued us, enfolded us in His endless embrace, and led us home – where we will dwell with Him in joy forever. In peace forever. Without hurt or worry or sickness or shame forevermore.

Catholic priest and writer, Henri Nouwen – wonderful spiritual guide to Catholics and Protestants alike – wrote these words toward the latter days of his life:

For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life – pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures – and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair.

Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not, “How am I to find God?” but “How am I to let myself be found by Him?” The question is not “How am I to know God?” but “How am I to let myself be known by God?” And, finally, the question is not “How am I to love God?” but “How am I to let myself be loved by God?” God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home . . . God is the shepherd who goes looking for his lost sheep. God is the woman who lights a lamp, sweeps out the house, and searches everywhere for her lost coin until she has found it . . .

It might sound strange, but God wants to find me as much as, if not more than, I want to find God.⁵

Which reminds me of another story about a game of hide-and-seek. This story is told by Robert Fulghum in his classic, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, the same book Lydia read to us from on Youth Sunday. Here's the story:

In the early dry dark of an October's Saturday evening, the neighborhood children are playing hide-and-seek. How long since I played hide-and-seek? Thirty years; maybe more. I remember how. I could become part of the game in a moment, if invited. Adults don't play hide-and-seek. Not for fun, anyway. Too bad.

Did you have a kid in your neighborhood who always hid so good, nobody could find him? We did. After a while we would give up on him and go off, leaving him to rot wherever he was. Sooner or later he would show up, all mad because we didn't keep looking for him. And we would get mad back because he wasn't playing the game the way it was supposed to be played. There's hiding and there's finding, we'd say. And he'd say it was hide-and-seek, not hide-and-give-UP, and we'd all yell about who made the rules and

who cared about who, anyway, and how we wouldn't play with him anymore if didn't get it straight and who needed him, anyhow, and things like that. Hide-and-peek-and yell. No matter what, though, the next time he would hide too good again. He's probably still hidden somewhere, for all I know.

As I write this, the neighborhood game goes on, and there's a kid under a pile of leaves in the yard just under my window. He has been there a long time now, and everybody else is found and they are about to give up on him over at the base. I considered going out to the base and telling them where he is hiding. And I thought about setting the leaves on fire to drive him out. Finally, I just yelled, "GET FOUND, KID!" out the window, and scared him so bad he probably wet his pants and started crying and ran home to tell his mother . . .

[But] so say I. To all those who have hid too good. Get found, kid!⁶

We are, all of us – at different points along the way, and certainly ultimately speaking – lost and needing to be found. But the Good News of the Gospel is that God has come down to this earth searching for us. And that He will not stop searching for us until every last one of us has been found. Like a shepherd searching through the night for that one lost sheep. Like a woman moving heaven and earth and all the furniture in between to find that one lost coin. So if today or tomorrow or some day you were to hear Him calling out your name, calling out to you just as He did to Adam and Eve, “*Where are you?*” – then, what I think Jesus is telling us this morning is simply this: “*Get Found, Kid! Get found!*” Let Him find you, and rescue you, and bring you home where you belong. Because when He does, the party, the joy – His and ours – will be never-ending.

¹ Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 34-35.

² Craddock, p. 35.

³ Genesis 3:1-7.

⁴ Genesis 3:8-9.

⁵ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p. 100.

⁶ Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (New York: Ballantine-Ivy Books, 1986, 1988), 55.