A God Who Searches Rev. William J. Ingersoll

Luke 15:1-10 First Presbyterian Church

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In an interview with an Interim Pastor Nominating Committee some years ago, I was asked an important question. Let me add a helpful footnote here:Always be careful what you say to a pastor if it’s not confidential; you never know when you might end up as a sermon illustration! Anyway, their question went something like this, “Bill, in a few sentences, what is your understanding of scripture?”

I thought for a moment and said, “The Bible is primarily a story of God’s search for humanity. It is not so much a story of humanity’s search for God but of God’s search for us – God’s relentless search in love for you and for me.” The group seemed to like that answer and I stand by it.

This morning, I offer our Gospel lesson as evidence of that. In both of these stories something has been lost, hidden, and in each of them there is a searcher, one who will not surrender the search until that which has been lost is found, until that which is hidden, has come to light.

The searcher is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep, Jesus says. One of the sheep wanders away. It wanders into a gully or becomes entangled in a thicket. Marauding wolves or hyenas pick up stragglers from the edges of the flock. Who can name all the ways that sheep have of getting lost in a wilderness? Sheep wander off. Can’t be helped. That’s the way sheep are. A shepherd grazing a flock in the wilderness makes a count at the end of the day- 97, 98, 99. One missing, that’s unfortunate, no doubt about it, but that’s the shepherding business. But this shepherd searches, seeking out the lost sheep.

The woman in Jesus’ second parable is also a searcher. She has lost a coin. A single coin, nothing much. She had ten silver coins, now one is missing. Mislaid, well, somewhere. It’s hard for us to get upset about the loss of a single coin. A quarter, but this woman will not let it go.

Now understand, it’s important to know that today’s scripture lesson begins with some religious folk sneering and grumbling because this man, this Jesus, welcomes sinners and even eats with them.

The way Jesus went about his work seemed careless to the Pharisees. Surely we can understand this, says the minister Patrick Willson. “Our own society’s wisdom has dozens of sayings to describe the problem: ‘Birds of a feather flock together;’ ‘You’re known by the company you keep; ‘Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.’”

In response to that, Jesus tells these two little stories.

“Which one of you,” he asks, “having 100 sheep and one strays from the flock, will not leave the other 99 in the wilderness – vulnerable to wolves, wandering off, and all other kinds of sheep mischief – and go out and beat the bushes until you find your *one* lost sheep. And when you find that *one* sheep, which one of you will not place that lost sheep upon your shoulders, like it’s a child, run home – where, by the way, you will probably find considerably *less* sheep than when you left – remember it says he left them in the wilderness- and cry out to your friends –‘Hey, let’s party – I found my one lost sheep.’ Now, which of you would not do that? And which one of you women, having lost a quarter, will move all your furniture and heavy appliances to the front yard, rip up your new carpet in the living room, tear up your just restored wooden floor in the den, and search relentlessly until you find that quarter. And when you have found your lost coin, will run out and shout to your neighbors up and down the street, ‘Come on, let’s have the biggest party Lake Forest and Lake Bluff have ever seen. I found my quarter!’”

Now, which of you would not do that? – I think we all know the answer. *None* of us would do that! (William Willimon)

None of us would be like that shepherd and place 99% of our investment at risk to recover a 1% loss. (Al Winn) And none of us would be like that woman and ransack a million dollar value home to find a measly quarter. Caution, prudence, common sense all dictate – write off the one sheep or one quarter – get over it – and move on.

But this shepherd, this woman are not like that – not at all. They search relentlessly, recklessly until- “until”, not ­,”if” – but *until* they find it. The sheep, the quarter. And then all heaven breaks loose!

Understand friends, this story is not about prudent, cautious, people like us. Instead this parable is about a relentless, reckless One who searches until that which is lost is found – until *we* are found – ones lost in our selfishness, our despair, our loneliness, our addiction, our guilt.

Patrick Willson points out we may have no clue how truly “lost” we are; we may be looking for nothing more than a way to get through the next day; yet all the while God is looking for us. Though we search for everything but God, God searches for us and the search is risky and relentless.

Though we hide ourselves in shame, dreaming there can be no homecoming and no forgiveness for people like us, God searches us out. Though we disguise ourselves with indifference and cloak ourselves with cynicism, (Someone in another town put it this way, “I used to be a Presbyterian on Sundays, now I’m a golfer”), still God seeks us. Though we become entangled in a thousand preoccupations so that we forget God altogether, God does not cease to search for us.

I had a friend from my young childhood that we called Billy on the Hill. I’ll always remember Billy because I still have a knot on my head where he hit me with his toy metal gun. That was in the days before plastic toys. When playing cowboys once, Billy took exception to my statement that I wanted to be the sheriff for Billy thought he should be. So he took the law in his own hands! Ouch!

Anyway, Billy was about five years old when his younger brother was born. Billy was so happy. He had wanted a younger brother to play with and teach things to. A younger brother! Nothing could have been more wonderful!

But things weren’t working out exactly as he had imagined. Everyone was taken with this tiny baby that was not yet ready to play. This little one got all the attention, all the love in the family.

Furthermore, Billy couldn’t do anything right. He left the back door ajar: “Billy, shut the door! The draft will give the baby a cold!” He shut the door too hard, “Billy, you’ll wake the baby.”

So finally, Billy ran away. He slipped off into the hilly West Virginia woods right behind their house and wandered until the sun went down and the air got chilled. Lonely, he began to cry.

After a while he heard noises nearby. What could it be! Was it a wild dog or a bobcat or even a wolf – he was only five and who knows what might be in these woods? Frightened, he tried to hide in some bushes. The footsteps came closer and closer.

“Billy, Billy.” It was his grandmother. She had missed him and known he had run away. She alone knew where he had hidden. She opened up the bushes and pulled him toward her to hold him close. “Billy, it’s time to come home.”

My friends, according to these stories of Jesus, this is the gospel, the glorious good news. God searches for us in our hiding. God’s search is risky and relentless because of God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s forgiveness. God wants us home, no matter how far we wander.

Yes, these parables – indeed, much of scripture, is about the God who searches for us. Scripture reveals to us that in Jesus Christ, God is a God who would do this. No – let me rephrase that. God is a God who *does* do this…*is* doing this…*will* do this…for you, you, and you, your loved ones, and even for me. Amen.

Sources

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