

## Finding the Lost

Year C

Season of Pentecost

Sunday Between September 11 and September 17 Inclusive

September 12, 2010, Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Read the Bible passage: [Luke 15:1-10](#), The Message; or [Luke 15:1-10](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Faith-provoking, historical insights into the lesson by [David Ewart](#), [Luke 15:1-10](#).

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this sermon.

The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

*Note: This sermon was first preached on September 16, 2007 at Edwards (Knox) United.*

We all love stories. We go to movies, watch TV, read books, and tell family stories. All are literary forms. We seek to find ourselves in those stories - seek the meaning of literature. Literature is an artistic presentation in words of some aspect of human experience. The purpose of literature is to provide enjoyment and vicarious experiences that can deepen and enrich our lives. Yet all literature cries out for understanding.

This is because not all stories are self evident. Some are dangerous to how we think. Others scare us.

Some are a puzzle. Parables are a particular form of story. There are transformational - they question the common sense views of the world. They reverse expectations. They puzzle us. They also puzzled writers like Luke. In telling them Jesus hoped that it would create an open space in one's consciousness, so much so that in the hearing one could actually feel the sense of God within the world and self.

Just like Luke, we too take the parables and domesticate them. This is not necessarily a bad thing, because our response is making the story ours. In doing so we experience the sense of God, we are changed and as changed people we go out to impact our world. The sense of God within causes us to engage the issues of our time, to do the right thing and to make a difference.

However when we listen to the parable as it was, it has an even more dramatic effect on us. We open a space in our reality where God slides into our experience.

Thus we listen with two levels, the story in itself and how the story has been understood. The two levels of hearing values up our experience. Think of it this way: we read a book and then we discuss it with others. Both experiences are valuable and the communal experiences makes the first impression stronger and more vivid for our living.

Hear then the lost sheep story. Does it make sense to leave the sheep alone and go after the others? Remember it is still dangerous for the sheep at home. They are left unprotected - no guard dogs to find the lost or protect the ones at home. If we were to do a cost benefit analysis we would say the risk to find the lost sheep is too great.

So the question is raised what kind of shepherd is this? This is a shepherd for whom the risk of losing one is the greatest issue - no cost benefit analysis going on here. In the reversal of expectations the listener is transformed - a new way of seeing reality is created.

A friend tells of story about her friends whose Land Rover broke down in Africa. They could not get it started so they left it and went to get parts. Now if any of you have been in a big city like New York, your experience would be of abandoned cars striped. This is what they expected on their return. But when they got there the locals had covered the car with large thorny trees, just as they would do to protect their cattle when left alone.

That is what the those listening to Jesus would expect the shepherd to do that. But that is not in the story. He leaves the sheep without a guard and searches for the lost one. It is about the trust in the compassion of God. In a dangerous world one could risk. It is then about the nature of God who seeks all things and risks all for the least. The story confronts us with the image of what if we lived that way?

Now Luke's interpretation gets us toward the point the African story gets us. The sheep in the fold are us - in Luke's case the community. The community is already safe. Our past experiences of danger can be overcome by the generosity of the stranger and the strange. Our concern, then, is to be for the other, those at the edge of society, those whose experience is one of being lost. It is other directed. Then the point is made, there in the wilderness are those who do care, and will come to our aid, even when we don't expect it. The world is much more gracious than we thought.

The coin story is even more dramatic. The coins represent the total security for the woman in a world of scarcity. Losing one's coin is devastation - in a world of scarcity it became even more of a catastrophe. Further, coins represented a dowry. To lose part of it would dishonour the home and family - they would become outcasts because the loss would raise questions about the woman's character.

With the aid of others she finds it. Now here is the kicker. She spends more than it is worth on a party. In a world of scarcity she would have been seen as foolish. She is too generous for her own good would be whispered words. Would that not also happen today? A spendthrift would be the whispered word.

That is the impact of this parable - no self respecting person would do as she did. Again the point is an image of God - a God who is generous in Grace. We want to draw some lines, make some limits but in the reign of God it is a dance of extreme generosity. Grace that overflows.

Again Luke helps us, What is on our heart? What rejoicing do we do in times of scarcity of compassion when compassion actually overflows? Are we attracted to those who break the conventions of our society and are inclusive of all?

# George Hermanson

May the Lure be with you

Like all stories the beauty of them is the multiple levels of meaning. They speak to us and we build our own interpretation and of the numerous ways the story has been understood. Here, then, is one perspective to take with you.

I like the idea of Luke that we are the community that already dances in joy. We have been found. And being found, our heart has been changed. Our habits revised. We take for granted that abundance of love is the true world about life.

Much discussion in our society is about how character is developed. Some fear that we are failing in the creation of the moral person. While it is true there is around us selfishness and self referencing and me-ism, when there is too much emphasize on these facts help us? Will a vision of fear and scarcity and meanness create a habit of heart that sends us out caring about the needs of others? No. Too much emphasize on the negative aspects of our culture can make us repressive rather than generous. Sure much of what we hear is an appeal to self interest - egocentric appeals like buy this lottery because we might win this house with a side note that will save these children or fight this disease. Now I would be more happy with a gift to the need, and if one could afford it, just play the dream of winning the big money, and not to confuse the two. Or in the realm of the political, often the appeal is not to the common good, but how will I benefit.

Our heart is formed by the stories we hear. If the stories are one of fear and scarcity than we get formed that way. Habit is both a gift and a danger. Habits of the heart direct us in the same way other habits send us - I don't have to think about shift the gears in my car because it has become habitual. If our stories are essentially ones of selfishness than our habits will reflect selfishness.

The stories we heard this morning are designed to break the conventional habits of thought and heart. The parables ask us to reverse the habits of the heart that are created by self interest. They ask us to form a heart based on trust and the true nature of reality is love. They are designed to open the heart to a God who the source of good and good for all of creation.

This is a not a God of vengeance or a authoritarian moralist, but a God of persuasion and joy. God seeks justice and compassion for all, without reserve, without conditions. God celebrates the change in heart from narrowness to generosity. All God seeks is that this sense of God forms our habits of heart. A heart of love and Grace will change the shape of our being - we become those who first loves others, attends to the needs of the least before we attend to our needs.

And the result is a party - we are different - we dance with the universe in its creativity and goodness. Our habit of the heart is to seek the lost and lonely. And in the end we now feel ourselves as those have been found - this is true self esteem - a heart of love out of which we habitual live.

George Hermanson

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