

Lose, Seek, Find

Ex 32: 7-14, Lk 15: 1-10

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Ex 32: 7-14

The Lord said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt! The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.’” And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

Lk 15: 1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Have you noticed a lost sheep wandering around here lately? Or have you seen a shiny coin glimmering in its hiding place recently?

They are here you know, a beloved sheep who has wandered away, a gleaming coin of great value that has been lost in the shadows. We are carefully looking for them, and I don't know about you, but I know that I have heard them calling out to be found. Tired of hiding, tired of feeling lost, they need us to continue seeking and to find them. They have been missing for some time now. They are valuable, loved and being looked for. When they are found there will be joy and rejoicing.

Over the past few years of transition at Smith Memorial Church there have been losses as some ministries, activities, and programs have been lost, no longer practiced, no longer available for anyone's benefit, no longer offering the welcome that breaks down walls, no longer being the spiritual nurture that creates a visible and active sign of God's presence.

With no sense of direction, they are sheep who have wandered away from the shepherd. People's energy and time, the coins and currency of congregational life, have been spent down, and renewal of this vitality has been on a losing track.

It may not even have been until they were missing that their value was truly known, or in the words of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, "Mostly it is loss which teaches us about the worth of things."

There are signs that we are looking on the right path. Many people, in this church and in the wider community, speak now of a renewed energy, vitality and spirit at Smith Church, and revised or revitalized programs are emerging. There is also a different, deeper appreciation for the choir, hand bells, Youth Groups, Farmer's Market, Hillsboro House worship, Harvest Supper and Cookie Walk that were held on to tightly enough to not go wandering off.

No different than the shepherd who went out after the sheep that was dependent upon him for care, nurture and safety, no different than the widow who hunted every nook and cranny of her home for what was essential in her life, we too have our search parties. The work of each of us, individually and in committees, through planning and prayerfully seeking out where God is calling us to be a blessing in the church and in the community, means that we are close to finding and reclaiming the vision as real, true and tangible. There is joy in the search, and there will be great rejoicing when all is found.

As we reflect on the lessons and wisdom of Jesus' words in the Gospel of Luke, we need to see that Jesus' highest value is not on what is missing, even though it is of great importance. The highest value is on *who* is doing the searching, who is doing the extraordinary searching and waiting to celebrate with extravagant joy. A shepherd, a lowly and dirty trade, a widow, a woman with nothing, just two ordinary people yet valued by God. They are reminders that God often works through ordinary people to do the extraordinary work of bringing about God's will, and call. While the programs, activities and ministries of Smith Church matter, and are important, vital, and essential, it is us, ordinary people, beloved children of God, who matter more. In human terms the value is on what is being looked for, in faith terms, in God's eyes, the true value is on those who are doing the looking. That is what is precious in God's sight.

Who is looking are the ones who are able to have a relationship with God. It is not a sheep, a coin, or the Israelite faith recast as a golden calf, creating a false god of false values that has a precious value.

The Old Testament lesson is known by the title, "The Golden Calf," which is unfortunate because the name misses what the story is truly about. The people that God had Moses lead from bondage to freedom went astray, they were lost, and created a golden god to worship. God was furious and ready to punish the Israelites for this yet that is not the end of the story. Moses persuaded God to forgive and to honor the promise to Abraham. The story is about the stunning and even surprising character of God, the never-ending grace of God.

God helps us, guides us and forgives us with grace. Even in anger, God's grace cared for the vulnerable, for those seeking hope, security and stability in a new and challenging time. Over these past few years God has carried you through your anger, hurt, frustration and challenges with hope, and more security and stability than was recognized.

Moses had a heartfelt conversation with God, perhaps similar to prayerful conversations you have had with God. Moses encouraged God—and just how amazing is that!—to turn from anger and wrath at the stiff-necked people, and to instead remember and honor the long ago promise to Abraham and all his descendants.

In this time of Smith Church seeking what has been lost, and finding glimpses and hints along the way, we too need to let go of the anger, hurt, frustrations and challenges in order to see the grace that guides us to reclaim what we seek.

Perhaps you recall the story of John Newton, slave-trader-turned-abolitionist, suicidal-sailor-turned-Anglican-clergyman, whose slow but eventual rejection of the golden idol of the riches to be made by selling African people into American slavery is a story of amazing grace. of one who was lost but now has been found.

A troubled, lost boy became a man of no moral principles, with no sense of responsibility and rejection of all religious beliefs until a gradual spiritual conversion changed his life. The golden yet false gods of stiff-necked wealth and power through selling other human beings were healed by grace.

We do not always expect or understand God's grace, yet joyfully it is there. As Anne Lamott wrote, "I do not at all understand the mystery of grace--only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."

Grace led the shepherd to the sheep, the widow to the coin, and the Israelites back to faith. Grace will lead us to fulfilling the vision for the future that God has set for us, the vision of ministries, activities, programs, energy and time in the ways we will be called to break down walls to offer a genuine community to all. There will be joy and rejoicing. Amen.