

“Lost and Found”

(Matthew 18.10-14)

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Introduction

It's a cluttered Gospel before us today. (Matthew 18.1-20) ¹

But in the jumble, there's the precious jewel of the *Parable of the Lost Sheep*. That's the doorway of light we're entering through this morning...

The Parable

Jesus begins with “What do you think?” He's expecting a reaction! ²

Then he describes this shepherd... who when he loses one sheep (*one sheep!*), leaves the rest of the flock (99 sheep!), alone and defenceless in the mountains, while he searches for the one that's strayed. When he finds it, he rejoices over it... he celebrates big time!

The crowd laugh and shake their heads.

“What?” says Jesus... ³

‘Jesus you're mad’ say the crowd. *‘No shepherd is going to do that! OK, it's bad luck to lose a sheep, but that's life. He's got to cut his losses and maximise the safety of the 99. Imagine if he comes back from rescuing the one sheep, and finds that wolves or robbers have got at the rest of the flock. Imagine going back to the boss and explaining that! You'd end up dead... or in slavery for the rest of your life. That's reality Jesus – that's the way life is. You've got to hold onto what you've got. Cut your losses and accept that some things are expendable... No shepherd would be that stupid!*

¹ There's way too much happening for a Sunday sermon, as *Matthew* and the early Christian community wrestle with unity, accountability and discipline in the face of flawed humanity... haunted by Jesus' teaching of radical, unlimited forgiveness.

² Note the presence of the crowd...

³ “Isn't that what a shepherd would do?”

Jesus looks intently at them and says, 'I guess you're right... no shepherd **would** do that... **but God does!**

In the world of GOD, no-one is expendable.

No-one is left behind.

Everyone is searched for.

Everyone is found.

Everyone is wanted... delighted in... celebrated...

That's how it is in GOD's world.'

Jesus consistently taught that *this* is the true nature of GOD... this is who GOD is...

And this is the true reality we live in... if only we'd wake up and realise it.

We are precious... we are wanted... we are searched for and found.

In a religious environment – then as it is now – where the emphasis is on who is acceptable to God and who is not,⁴ on who is righteous and who is a sinner, Jesus said NO, it's not like that at all.

It's all about *being lost* and *being found*.

LOST and FOUND...

Lost

What's it like to be lost?

Well, when *Luke* records this same parable,⁵ he pairs it with *The Prodigal Son*⁶... giving us an accompanying story that explores 'what it is to be lost'.⁷

In the Prodigal Son, we learn that to be lost is to be profoundly disconnected...

- From GOD – disconnected from the one, the father/mother, who not only birthed us, but who loves and sustains us, even when we don't realise it.
- From HOME – disconnected from our centre, our ground, our heart.

⁴ The breathtaking arrogance of us assuming that somehow we know!

⁵ Luke 15.4-7

⁶ Luke 15.11-32

⁷ (The father says, "This son of mine was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.)

- From OTHERS – the prodigal swaps family/community for the superficial company of partygoers... who soon melt away when the money runs out... leaving him utterly alone.
- From SELF and from LIFE – the prodigal wakes up in a pigsty, utterly miserable, realising he's lost everything that mattered... realising that **he is lost**.

So, to be *lost* is to be disconnected from everything that matters...

In the *Prodigal Son*, the young man acts wilfully.

He thinks he doesn't need anyone else – not God, not family... That if he can just get the inheritance money, he can carve-out a fabulous life for himself. He believes he's in charge of his own destiny – that he can live life on his own terms.

We open *our* eyes and realise that our society – this consumerist, individualist culture of ours – is **lost**... wilfully so.

We believe we have no need for GOD... we think we're little gods who can make it on our own... if we can only just get our hands on enough stuff... enough status... enough power.

And so, as a people – whether we recognise it or not – we are profoundly and miserably disconnected... wilfully so...

- from GOD
- from the earth
- from each other
- and even our very selves.

We *are* lost... and the day of reckoning is probably coming near now... when we'll wake up in the pigsty and realise, we've lost everything that matters.

We're all part of that communal lostness. For it's the society that we live in.

But, what of our personal experience of being lost?

Some of us won't recognise the 'word' in our experience... but some of us will know it viscerally.

We look back at periods in our life when we were *lost* for months... maybe years.⁸

And many of us will experience times of *lostness* quite regularly – a day here, a morning there, a night of tossing-and-turning...

Where we can't find ourselves...

⁸ For some of us that time will be here and now.

Where we feel we're drifting aimlessly – no meaning, no purpose, no direction...

Where we feel disconnected... from GOD... from others (even those we're close to)... and even from any sense of who we are. “Who am I? Where do I belong? What is the point of me?”

That's what it is to be *lost*.

Jesus said, ‘It's those who know themselves as lost, who I've come to find.’

Found

Jesus teaches that GOD is like a shepherd who searches for us... never resting until the very last is found.

So, what's it like to be found?

Being found is the experience of being re-connected...

It feels like *being home*...

... knowing, (well-enough at least), who we are... where we are... and how we fit...

... knowing we are seen, heard, loved...

... knowing we are one with GOD.

The awareness of *being found* is an experience of beauty and joy.

Although so much church-talk is about us searching for God – or even worse, us making ourselves worthy of God's presence – **it is GOD who searches for us!**

It is GOD who finds us!

And this is important.

Critical advice given to travellers in remote out-back Australia – those roads where people rarely pass...

If you get lost, if your car breaks down, *stay with the car*.

For it's those who head-off into the blank land in a desperate attempt to save themselves, who die.

You can't save yourself... **but** stay with the car, being still, being patient... and although it may take a while... you will eventually be found. You will be found!

When we are lost in life... when we realise that we're in desolate territory, with no idea where we are... completely cut-off... *our* first inclination is to make heroic attempts to save ourselves. We fling ourselves into all manner of wilful activity, to try to achieve our own rescue...
But this only makes things worse. We become even more lost in the process.

Realising you are lost is by no means a bad thing... because it is (actually) the true state of much of our lives.

Hear the voice of Christ in this lostness.

You are of inestimable value to GOD.

Wait... be still... be open and attentive... for GOD *will* come.

GOD *will* find you.

Conclusion

Yes, but what's it *like* to be found by God?

Well, there are the BIG dramatic stories of lives that are found...

Like John Newton, the 18th century author of "*Amazing Grace*" – a fractious mean-tempered man whose living was slave-trading... who at a time of personal desperation, was found by God... and became a minister, a hymn-writer *and* a champion of abolition.

*"I once was lost but now am found
was blind but now I see."*

But what about the ordinary experiences... the ones that happen all the time, if we're awake to them...

It's like a man waking-up full of anxiety... somehow overnight he became lost in the trauma of his past... He is despairing... not knowing what to do. But out of dogged habit, he drags himself to his daily rendezvous with GOD, his morning time of prayer and reflection – so lost... so lost. And yet... and yet... no sooner is the candle lit, than the Stillness, the Quiet descends, and he experiences the enveloping embrace of LOVE... He knows himself connected to God and to everyone and everything. In his lostness he knows himself to be found.

Simple...

Ordinary...

And yet so beautiful!

Or it can be like a man, not long retired, whose having one of those occasional days where he feels lost in the emptiness, now there is no career. “*Who am I? What is my purpose? Where do I fit now?*” He is quite lost... and he knows it. But then late afternoon, the Dean phones to say there is a glitch in the roster, and can he fill-in this Sunday? Well, that’s something he *can* contribute at least... It helps... a little.

But later that night, he looks to see what the Sunday Gospel theme is... And it’s about being lost... and being found. And that man hears – somewhere in the distant cosmos – he hears angels laughing in celebration! For that man was lost... but now he’s found.