

## ***Lost and Found***

*a sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 11, 2022  
based on LUKE 15:1-10*

*"What is lost is nothing to what's found, and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup. F. Buechner*

A few years ago I read a book on clergy burnout. I was doing fine myself, but I had been part of a group of seven clergy who met together every three weeks in Raleigh Hills for support. Within four years, four of the group had left the ministry. Four out of seven.

These were people for whom ministry was not just another job choice. They'd had such a passion for what they wanted to do – so much so that they took Greek and Hebrew, for heaven's sake, and a class on church law. They'd taken long exams, and somehow over time they had lost their taste for what they had taken up with such enthusiasm in the beginning.

The author of this book had interviewed scores of ministers and those who worked with them, and one of those counselors who often counseled troubled pastors summed the problem up this way:

"No one should go into the pastoral ministry who had previously been a professional portrait photographer"

His theory was this: If you like having your subjects standing still and remaining always in focus you will be miserable in the ministry. People in the church never stand still -- everything is always fluid, in motion.

Ministry, at its best is often wacky, pulled together, and somewhat reckless

And it was as good as it was because we knew we had to be flexible around our offerings, and sometimes our scheduling. Some of the best things we did we're added at the last minute, and that was great for some and not for others.

Now I say this because this is the way the God operates according to Jesus.

People asked Jesus one day, "Show us what God is like" Jesus went right on and portrayed a divine messiness, almost recklessness, at the heart of reality.

A farmer went out to sow his field and . . . he carefully prepared the soil removing all the rocks and weeds marking off neat rows placing the seed exactly 6 inches apart covering each with exactly 3/4 an inch of soil ??

No !! This farmer didn't prepare the soil at all. According to Jesus, he just started flinging seed everywhere. Some fell on the path, some on the rocks, some in the weeds and some on the good soil; there some of it marvelously took root and a harvest was eventually gotten in.

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That's the kind of God who made the world, says Jesus.

Again he tells a parable, about a farmer -- same farmer. The man's servants come running to this farmer saying, "Master, there are weeds coming up in the midst of your new wheat." An enemy must have done this."

Enemy my eye, you get just this kind of thing when you sow seed with such abandon.

"Do you want us to go out and carefully root up all these weeds from amongst your good wheat" they ask?

"No" says the farmer, "let it all grow. I just live to see stuff grow. We'll sort it all out come October. "

And Jesus says, "That's the way God runs the world." Not the way we might imagine.

It's not something any of us would think of, but it's the way God works.

In today's gospel Jesus asks, "Which of you, if you lost a coin would not completely tear your living room apart until you found your stray half-dollar? Ripping up the carpet. Moving the living room furniture out onto the front lawn.

And when you found the quarters would you not run out into the street calling to the neighbors, 'Come party with me, I've found my lost 50 cents.'

Would you do that? Of course you wouldn't.

Jesus tells of a father who spends a fortune on a party to proudly welcome home a son who went through half the value of his father's estate in about two weeks and then has the temerity to come home.

Remember what that father did, hosting a reception for the boy that cost a fortune?

Jesus asks us, "Which of you, if you lost one sheep would not leave the other 99 alone in the wilderness, totally exposed, risking everything for one sheep a sheep that has run away before and will probably do it again before the week is out.

And yet that shepherd, when he has found that sheep, is so happy he throws a party for the neighbors, too.

Who would do that? Few if any of us -- but God does.

Jesus tells these outrageous little stories about God to those who "grumbled" because of the unsavory company Jesus kept: prostitutes, taxcollectors and the like.

Who are these complainers, these Pharisees? In my opinion they're just a bunch of grumpy old men. They might be played on the screen by Jack Nicholson, Robert DeNiro and Morgan Freeman.

These Pharisees, they had started out alright, full of a passion for God and a genuine love for humankind, but something happened over time. The passion dried up, the institution took over.

With no sabbatical program in place they got stuck in a rut. They needed someone to shake them up and Jesus was just the one to do it.

He is not above giving them a swift kick when he thinks they need one.

I once read an article called, "Who's Grumpy?!?" and it's not about Snow White.

It opens remembering Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, noted for his testy exchanges with the press, and then it swiftly moved on to describe the well-known, hot tempered basketball coach – Bobby Knight, best known for flinging chairs across the court.

"Why were these guys so grumpy? Maybe they just needed a hug. Or maybe they suffered from a condition we all recognize that finally has a name: *Irritable Male Syndrome*. It's the subject and title of a book by psychotherapist Jed Diamond. Here's how the book begins:

"Does this sound like someone you know? "He blames me for everything these days," says a middle-aged woman describing her spouse. "If his socks or underwear are missing, I must have put them somewhere or done something with them to [make him mad] ... that's what he tells me . . . My husband used to be the most positive, upbeat, funny person I knew. Now, it's like living with an angry brick!"

"A man doesn't turn into a grump overnight. No, the death of a man's soul is never quick. It is a slow dying, a succession of little deaths that continues until we wake up one day in the barren land of a million used tires and three legged dogs."

Listen to these words about how that might happen. They're from the late Mike Yaconelli of Yreka.

"The place where I live, located under the shadow of Mount Shasta, is a valley spotted with left-over lava from long-ago volcanic eruptions. As a result, ranches (rather than farms) checker the terrain of Siskiyou County in northern California. Cattle ranches predominate and cows are everywhere. Local range laws specify that if a cow wanders into the road and your car hits it, you are legally responsible for the animal's death.

Many ranches have extensive fencing, but too many cows still manage to end up on the road. One morning I came across an old story told by a farmer, which explains how cows end up on the road and lost:

"A cow is nibbling on a tuft of grass in the middle of a field, moving from one tuft to the next. Before you know it, she ends up at some grass next to the fence. Noticing a nice clump of green on the other side of the fence, the cow stumbles through an old tear in the fences and finds herself outside on the road. "Cows don't intend to get lost," the farmer explained, "they just nibble their way to lostness." Yaconelli continues ...

"The farmer didn't know it, but he was talking about more than cows. None of us intends to have our souls wander onto dull listless highway. First comes the tuft of education, then the tuft of marriage, then children, a new home, and one day we wake up to discover that we have nibbled our way to lostness." (Michael Yaconelli, *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith*, Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1998).

Here's what happens, we get to a place where we sometimes don't recognize ourselves anymore. That's crazy, I know, but it happens so slowly. And we never would know at all unless something comes along to wake us up. We act out a sort of death wish by behaving so badly we get caught or caught up in it so deeply we have to stop and take the measure of the moment.

Jed Diamond say this -- "The question I'd put to an older man is, 'Now that you've done what you were supposed to do, what were you put here on earth to do?'"

If your'e retired and you were good at what you did and you now have a shortage of meaning, find something else that gives you meaning – something maybe even deeper than say, making money. It's time to move on, not go backward.

Sometimes we wake up, kind of dazed by where we are, and we have a crisis. It's part of maturing. It's a necessary chapter in a person's later life.

And, by the way, women are not immune to this problem. They can get lost, too.

Anyway, Jesus says God is like the shepherd who is never satisfied to leave one lost sheep alone in the cold. If you hear a voice calling you in your lostness it is probably, at some level, the voice of your Creator.

Isn't it lovely to know you've been missed? Sometimes that can be the most consoling feeling in the world. It can go a long way to getting us back on track.

I think of the Amish. Amish have lost ones, too. At each and every mealtime, they set a place for any Amish person in their family who has intentionally left the family; who has decided to live among the "English" – the outsiders.

Yes, and nobody else sits in their place. Plate, knife, fork, spoon, are waiting there for that person from the beginning of the meal to the end. This is repeated three times a day. They set the place each mealtime; they put everything down fresh including the napkin, so that person is remembered regularly and always.

And because all the Amish do that, the person who has chosen to live *outside* the clan can't help but remember that he or she is missed. Whatever you think about the Amish, let me say this -- that is a very powerful thing.

It is part of the power of love.

Love. Today we acknowledge the 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary of something we have come to call, 9/11. Twenty-one years, and, you know, I often think of a young man who died that day whose name is Welles Crowther.

Welles Crowther will always be a young man. At the age of 24, he was an equities trader at Sandler O'Neill in the South Tower. On September 11, 2001 he was at his desk on the 104<sup>th</sup> floor when an airplane crashed into the floor below him.

Somehow he managed to get around it and down to the lobby. In the next hour he managed to go up and down the stairwells of that building more than a dozen times. He died in its collapse, but not before he managed to carry 18 injured people to safety, and point the way out to many more – he carried one woman down 15 flights of stairs on his back.

He became known for months only as the “mysterious man in the red bandanna.” Survivors told his story without knowing his name. Welles’ mother, Allison, knew that her son always carried a red bandanna. He had done so since he was a kid. His father, like Welles, a volunteer firefighter, carried a blue one. Welles, wanted to be like his father but he also wanted to be different, so he chose to carry a red one.

Allison sought out the eighteen survivors and showed them a photo of her son, and they were able to identify him as their savior. Wells remains were found in March of 2002 along with the remains of many firefighters together in a stairwell of the South Tower. I wrote a piece about him for the *Ashland Daily Tidings* in 2002. I didn’t think anything more of it until a couple of months later when I got a call from the newspaper that a package was waiting for me at their offices. It was from Welles’ mother, Allison.

Her husband had run across my column and passed it to her and she wanted me to know how much it meant to her that others were working to keep the memory of their son alive. She didn’t want him to be lost entirely. You know what she sent me? Yep, a red bandanna.

And on the note she had printed the words, “Love Alone Prevails.”

I love the way Wells answered something deep within himself on that day – something deeper than his equities trader self, something even deeper than his instinct for self-preservation.

And I love how his mother refused to let him go. How she sought out the people he saved, like the woman in Jesus’ parable sought that lost coin.

Lost and found. The nature of all human beings to wander sometime and to become lost, and the *counter* power of love – these are two of the most profound forces in the world. They are part of the maturing process. They are both part of how we rid ourselves of obsolete impulses and behaviors and, in round about ways, find our way to our deeper selves.

This often happens multiple times in a lifetime. Thank God for those times when we can truly say, “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

Amen

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