

A Bird in the Hand

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Luke 15:1-10

Jesus, you may recall, is on his way to Jerusalem.

All the tax collectors and sinners came close to [Jesus] to listen to him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling. They said, “This one welcomes sinners, and he eats with them.” So he told them this parable:

“What person among you, who has a hundred sheep and loses one of them, doesn’t leave the ninety-nine in the pasture and go to the lost one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he puts it on his shoulders with joy, goes home, and calls together his friends and neighbors, telling them, ‘Rejoice with me! I found my lost sheep.’

“I tell you, there will be joy in heaven like this over one sinner who repents, rather than over ninety-nine righteous people who don’t need to repent.

“Or what woman, who has ten drachmas, if she loses one drachma, doesn’t light a lamp and sweep her house and search diligently until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, telling [them], ‘Rejoice with me! I found the drachma I had lost.’

“I tell you, there will be joy like this before God’s angels over one sinner who repents.”

Children’s Story

Sammy the Squirrel loves to gather acorns in the fall. He also needs to gather acorns in the fall. Otherwise there would be nothing to eat in the spring.

Sammy is fussy when he gathers his acorns. He stacks them up and arranges them just so. And he counts them. Last year, for example, Sammy stored away 1,286 acorns. Then he went to bed.

Sammy woke up one day in January. With tired eyes, he looked at his rows of stacked acorns. Right away he could tell that one acorn was missing. Now there were only 1285 acorns stored away!

What do you suppose Sammy did about that? Nothing. He went back to bed. It would have been silly to go out into the snow and cold of January for one missing acorn. Some things are not worth looking for.

But some things are worth looking for. The Bible says that God looked for Adam and Eve, when they were lost in the garden. God has been looking for lost people ever since. That’s a very good thing.

Sermon

In early August, a portion of the Crandall Canyon Mine in Utah collapsed. Six miners were trapped. Rescue operations began immediately. And for the next twenty-five days, family members, friends, and co-workers kept vigil. The search was carried out with brute force and with high-technology. But the search was halted when a cave-in killed three of the would-be rescuers. Then the search was restarted. Then it was halted again. Then it was restarted again. Finally, after twenty-five days, the search was suspended. The rescue operation was stopped. On that day, the grief of the family members became permanent. There would be no undoing of their loss.

We all know what it’s like to lose things. Losing things is an inescapable part of life. Sometimes when we lose something, it’s a source of irritation. Sometimes it’s a source of frustration. And sometimes when we lose something, it’s an endless agony.

For nearly two weeks at our house, we've been looking for a missing Netflix DVD. We've been flipping over cushions and moving furniture, all to no avail. That loss is just an annoyance. It may cost us a few dollars, but that's all.

Other losses are more significant and lasting. Yesterday at the carnival, I talked to a first grader who has deep feelings. He said he was sad over losing a good friend from his days at the Child Care Center here. The two boys went their separate ways a year ago, when they moved on to Kindergarten. That first grader has new friends now. But it's not the same, he told me. New friends don't make up for the friend and the friendship he lost. As I said, other losses are more significant.

Now, some things are lost beyond recovery — a child's innocence, for example. But much of what we lose, we can find again. And so, we search. **We search longest and hardest for what we value most.**

Some things aren't worth much of a search. You won't turn your house upside-down trying to find a Borders gift card with a \$2.80 balance. And you're not likely to scour the country lanes near your house when the cat you hate finally runs away.

But not everything is so trivial. Can't locate your passport three days before you leave on a trip to Europe? You'll turn your house upside-down and inside-out until you find it. Can't remember where you put the phone number of an old friend you've had haunting dreams about for three nights in a row? You'll Google her every way you can think of, and you'll contact old mutual acquaintances, until you get her number and call her.

The aviator/adventurer Steve Fossett disappeared two weeks ago. The search and rescue efforts have been extensive and intensive. In addition to standard-type searches using planes and helicopters, fifty thousand people have been poring over digital satellite images online, looking for photographic evidence of Fossett's downed plane. Fifty thousand people! Either Fossett is very valuable to people, or people are seeking glory for themselves or for some new-fangled technology, or maybe they just want to help. In any case, it's quite a search.

The question with any search is, How far should it go? How long should the search continue? An hour? A month? A year? Indefinitely? At what cost should a search be launched and at what cost should it be continued? How much time will we spend on the search? How much money? How much worry? And what risks are worth taking when something is lost? Is it worth losing your reputation, losing your fortune, losing your life even, to find something (or someone) that's been lost?

Luke 15 records two stories about losing, about searching, about finding. There's a shepherd who has one hundred sheep. He keeps a careful record. What does he do when one sheep comes up missing? He turns his attention away from the ninety-nine sheep toward the one sheep. Because a sheep that's lost is a sheep that matters the most. Then there's a woman with ten drachmas. It's not much money, but it's what she has. What does she do when one coin comes up missing? She turns her attention away from the nine coins that are safely tucked away, and she turns her house upside-down and inside-out to find the one missing coin. Because a missing coin is a coin that matters the most. And when a lost coin is found, or a lost sheep is found, the joy is contagious. It's a small thing perhaps, but it's worth celebrating.

These two stories, of course, are about what God is up to through Jesus. God has come to look for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. God has come to recover what is more precious to him than any gold coin. God has come for misfits and outcasts, for fools and rebels. God has come for home-wreckers, hookers, and homos. God has come for the jilted and for junkies. God has come for the messed up and the messed with. As they put it in the first century, God has come for sinners.

It's a long search. It's a difficult, frustrating search. Many of the "good" people aren't happy at all that this search is even being made. And this search? It will lead to Jerusalem. This search? It will lead to a cross. Because sometimes, when you search for what you value the most, it will cost you your life.

The problem with Jesus' opponents (and perhaps with you and me) was a failure to value what God treasures. God loves the lost. God loves people who don't know him as God. God loves people who don't acknowledge, honor, obey, or worship God. God loves them. God wants to embrace them. God searches for them. God is not satisfied with ninety-nine sheep in the pasture. The ninety-nine are precious, too. But one sheep is missing! God is not satisfied with nine coins safely tucked away. The nine are precious, too. But one coin is missing! God is not satisfied with a bird in the hand. He wants the two in the bush, also!

Jesus' opponents had only criticism for him. There were plenty of good folks for Jesus to spend time with — them and their friends, no doubt. But here he was welcoming sinners and eating with them. He was having intimate interactions with the wrong people. Jesus told his opponents that heaven rejoiced when one of these "wrong people" turned to him, that the heart of God was deeply satisfied. Would they not share in his joy?

Here at Olentangy Church, we have a Fellowship Committee. That committee encourages us and helps us to welcome each other and, often, to eat with each other, that is, to eat with the rest of the ninety-nine. That's a good thing. The ninety-nine need to eat. And we need to look after each other.

But the Fellowship Committee put something different together yesterday. We welcomed other people. We ate with other people. We didn't worry about the ninety-nine. We didn't worry about ourselves. And we had a celebration. There were smiles everywhere.

Were some of yesterday's guests "lost"? Perhaps. We don't know. And that's all right. It's not up to us to figure out who's lost. Rather, it's up to us to supply a way in which people can turn to Jesus. We do that by being a community of faith, Christian faith — historic Christian faith in this 21st century city — that preaches the word and breaks the bread.

That's how it works. We do the welcoming. We share the eating. But God does the finding. After all, we didn't find ourselves, did we? No! God looked for us. God called to us. God found us. And the angels? They had a party.