

SERMON TITLE	The Value of Being Lost
TIME/PROPER	Year C 16th Sunday after Pentecost
PREACHER	The Rev. Dale Woods, Acting Director, Pastoral Studies
LOCATION	Presbyterian College, Montreal, Quebec
SCRIPTURES	Luke 15:1-10

The Value of Being Lost

A teacher once asked her students this question: “If green is the colour of being bad and red is the colour of being good, which colour are you?” There was silence for a few minutes until one brave girl put up her hand and said, “I think I’d be striped.” How true—out of the mouths of babes as they say.

Our lives are such a mixture of things. As someone has said, “within each of us there is an eagle that wants to soar to the heights and a hippo that wants to wallow in the mud.”

I raise that thought this morning because of our reading in Luke’s gospel. Jesus has just made some rather startling comments about discipleship. If you want to follow me, says Jesus, you will need to let go of family, friends, even your own life. Before he told the people that, there was a large crowd following him. After he said that a lot of people went home mumbling to themselves, “Who needs a messiah like that?”

But there is one group that refuses to go home—the most unlikely of all people. They are tax collectors and sinners. And when the religious leaders see the kind of company Jesus keeps, they’re appalled. It’s not just that he hangs around them, he actually welcomes them. It would be different if Jesus would call down some judgment on them, warn them of their ways. That would be different. But no, he eats with them—a sign that he fully accepts them. As far as they’re concerned Jesus is simply condoning their sin. What kind of a Messiah would do that?

My guess is that if we were there we might be a bit upset too.

The tax collectors worked for the Roman government that was occupying Israel. They were traitors, really. They ripped people off and some of them became very wealthy doing it. They certainly got John the Baptist’s temper up. Remember when they came to be baptized by John and they asked him what should we do? He said, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you. Stop ripping the people off.”

Imagine someone ripping you off financially and then seeing Jesus having a meal with them. Wouldn't you want to say, "Hey Jesus, do you know what this guy did? Do you know how many people this guy ripped off? Do you really know who you're eating with?"

As for sinners, they're all the people every parent tells their children not to hang around with. "Now Jimmy, you stay away from that Mary Lou. She's nothing but trouble with a capital T."

It's not that Jesus and the Pharisees disagree about the people being sinners. They both agree on that. Where they differ is on how they interpret the word. For the Pharisee, as with most of us, the definition of a sinner is put in moral terms. The sinner is someone who fails to live up to a certain moral standard. They have chosen to live in a certain way and they deserve the consequences of their behavior. If they want to repent and change their ways, that's fine. Let them come back once they've cleaned up their act. But until then, we have nothing to do with them. It was written into their tradition: "Let not a person associate with sinners even to bring them near to the Torah." Clean up first and then come.

But Jesus defines sin differently. It's not simply about morality—doing something wrong; it's about being lost.

And then he explains what he means with a few stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. The stories tell us what life is like for us, and what life is like for God.

Who of us has not known the sense of being lost? There are so many ways to get lost in this life. Sometimes people just wake up one day and the thought comes to them, 'I have no idea where I am going or what I am doing with my life'. The best description they can give is 'being lost'. Somewhere along the way we gave up on adventure and joy and settled for security and respectability.

No one is exempt. I remember one Anglican priest telling us his story in seminary. He had gone into ministry with all the high ideals of every other theological student. Maybe he wouldn't change the world, but he was going to make a difference. Three years into his ministry, the stress began to build up. (Unlike Presbyterians, Anglicans have stress in ministry!) He'd go home, try to relax with a glass of wine. Soon it was two or three glasses of wine and then something a little stronger. Before he knew it, he was taking his liquid stress reducer during the day. He found out that there were others in his congregation who did the same thing. So he arranged his home visitations around the drinking habits of his congregation. By the time he got home, he was plastered. Then things began to fall apart. His wife left him. The congregation called the Bishop. He hit rock bottom. 'Lost' is how he described it.

The thing about getting lost is that it's not something you do intentionally. How do sheep get lost? They just nibble their way to being lost. And by and large so do we.

As Frederick Beuchner writes, *“If God is like a shepherd, there are more than just a few ways, needless to say, that people like you and me are like sheep. Being timid, greedy, foolish, and half holy is only part of it. Like sheep we get hungry, and hungry for more than just food. We get thirsty for more than just drink. Our souls get hungry and thirsty; in fact, it is often that sense of inner emptiness that makes us know we have souls in the first place. There is nothing that the world has to give us, there is nothing that we have to give each other even, that ever quite fills them.”*

That’s why these stories are such good news for us. They tell us that our natural bent for getting lost is no match for God’s natural bent for finding us! Which of you, if you had one lost sheep wouldn’t leave the other 99 in the desert and go looking for it? asks Jesus. The truth is, probably none of us. But God would.

Which of you if you lost a few thousand dollars wouldn’t keep at it until you’d torn the house down to find it? Well probably none of us. But God would.

How many of you if you had a son or daughter who ripped you off and then came home one day wouldn’t rush out to meet them and throw a big party for them? Well probably none of us would, not at least without setting some ground rules if they planned on coming home. But God would!

When you understand sin in terms only of morality you enter the world of judgment. “I would never do what they did!” But when you understand sin as being lost, you enter into a world of compassion because you know how easy it can be to lose your way.

Imagine you’re walking through a department store and you see a young child in tears. It’s obvious that he has become separated from his mom. It would be possible to walk past him and say to yourself, “Stupid kid. Obviously wasn’t paying attention. Now he’s lost. Serves him right.” You could say that, but it’s unlikely, because as soon as you understand the child as lost, the natural response is compassion. You would stop and ask the child his name, maybe take him to the customer service desk and have them make an announcement over the intercom. And if you’re fortunate as I once was, the person might even buy you an ice cream and sit and wait with you!

In the stories Jesus tells, God isn’t so much interested in sin as interested in healing those beaten down by it. Elsewhere, when the Pharisees ask the disciples why Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners Jesus answers with these words: “God desires mercy, not sacrifice.” And when you throw mercy into the mix, the line becomes blurry.

When Robert Coles, the well known child psychologist was watching some children draw pictures of their understanding of God, he was intrigued by one boy who began with a circle, divided with a line through it. When Coles came around the second time the boy was erasing the line. Intrigued, Coles asked the boy what he was drawing. The boy said, “Well the circle represented all of us and the line in the middle was the line between heaven and hell. But the more I thought about it, I thought maybe it’s not that simple so I’m taking the line out.”

Jesus, I think, would agree. He told the story about a farmer who went out to sow seed. He just threw it everywhere. On the hard stones, on the paths, in the weeds, and on the good soil. He just throws it everywhere, because apparently you can never tell where the seed might take root.

Albert Race Sample tells his own story of redemption in his book *Racehoss, Big Emma's Boy*. He grew up in a violent home and was a repeat offender in the Texas prison system. His life followed a predictable pattern: prison, parole, offense, prison. But one day, in the darkness of solitary confinement, something changed. This is what he writes:

The slamming of the two steel doors still rang in my ears. Sitting naked on the slab in pitch-black silence, I hung my head as the tears bounced off the floor onto my feet....Sweat poured. Gritting my teeth, I hugged and rocked myself, trying to squeeze my head against the unyielding concrete...I mauled myself, scratching and tearing my body. Slumped, exhausted, on the slab I covered my face with both hands and cried out, "Help me, God! Help meee!...."

A ray of light between my fingers. Slowly uncovering my face, the whole cell was illuminated like a 40-watt bulb was turned on. The soft light soothed and I no longer was afraid. Engulfed by a presence, I felt it reassuring me. No pressure any more, I breathed freely. I had never felt such well-being, so good, in all my life. Safe. Loved.... And the voice within talked me through the pit in my belly, "Don'cha worry about a thing. But you must tell them about me."

*I lay back on the slab. A change had taken place. Never before had I felt so totally loved. That's really all I ever wanted. The biggest need in my life fulfilled in an instant. (Albert Race Sampler, *Racehoss: Big Emma's Boy*, Balantine Books, 1986).*

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them, they said." "I have come for the lost," he said. For this we can say, "Thank you God." Amen.