

THE LOST ARE FOUND*by Elaine Poproski***LUKE 15:1 – 10**

Have you ever been lost? Do you remember what it felt like?

Quite a few years ago I had an opportunity to go to Israel with a group of people. One of the days that we were there, we were in the old city of Jerusalem and our tour guides were off that day, which meant we were left to our own devices to tour the city. It is not like Toronto. It's packed with people – narrow alleys with shops down each side, not with vehicles, but with people, people, people. You can reach out your arms to each side and touch each side of the alley, except you couldn't really do that because there were so many people. There was so much noise. There were people in the shops yelling out to passers-by, getting them to come into the shops, check out their wares, and buy things. I'm used to, if I go shopping, walking into a store and having someone ask if they can help, to which I say that I'm just looking, and then they leave me alone. That did not happen. I thought I could just walk up to a stall and look at what was there. But the shop owner was really forceful, ignored my "I'm just looking", and kept saying "come in, come in, I have more..." Because I'm a polite Canadian, I thought I'd go into the shop and have a look and see and then leave. But when I didn't want to buy anything and tried to leave, he became, in my interpretation, enraged and started yelling and screaming at me. So I took off out of the store and he was yelling after me. It was a complete cultural miscommunication.

In the time that I had been in that little shop, the rest of the group disappeared. So there I was, in the old city, surrounded by people, most of whom were speaking languages I didn't know, my own adrenaline pumping from the experience I'd just had, completely unable to find my group. I also have a pathetic sense of direction, so often when I come out of a store, I don't know which way I was going to begin with.

That experience of being lost was so scary; it was so frightening. I didn't even know who I would ask for help or how I would ask for help, since I didn't speak any of the languages that were being spoken in the city. Thankfully, one of the people in our group was extremely tall, so as I went barrelling down the alley, I saw his head towering over everyone else and I made a beeline to him.

In that moment, when I didn't know which way to go, when I didn't know where my group was, when I didn't even know where I was, there was this terror – this fear – that gripped me. I don't know if any of you have ever been lost like this; if any of you have ever experienced that kind of sense of not being able to find your way. Maybe not to that extreme, maybe just the extreme disorientation. Like when you first started riding the Toronto subway system, and you come up out of a station and you don't know which way is north, south, east, or west – which direction you're supposed to be going. I'd like you to hold onto that sense of what it feels like to be lost, as we go through this morning's sermon.

Today's Scripture reading from Luke 15 begins by telling us that all the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus and that the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling about it.

The Pharisees and the scribes were the religious people. They were the people who took seriously God's commands. They were the people who earnestly and even zealously tried to live

righteous lives – lives of obedience to God’s law. Part of what that meant was that they had to be careful about who they surrounded themselves with. There was always a danger of coming into too close contact with someone who was unclean – someone who wasn’t living a righteous life – someone who wasn’t bothering with God’s law.

We are really good at condemning the Pharisees and the scribes. Jesus certainly didn’t hold back from condemning them. But I think we have to be cautious about this. They may have been misguided. Many of them may have been hypocrites – claiming to be about righteous living and holiness, but in fact more swayed by power – by being part of the in-crowd – than anything else. But the foundational motives of their groups were good. These groups were initiated and carried forward by people who took God’s law seriously.

And as they witnessed the kinds of people Jesus welcomed into his presence, they grumbled and complained.

It wasn’t just that these sinners and tax collectors – it’s funny, the fact that tax collectors are named outside the pretty all-encompassing label of sinners, gives a hint of how corrupt they were and how deeply they were hated by pretty much everyone. They were the worst of the worst. They were puppets of Rome, ripping off their own people on Rome’s behalf, for no better reason than their own wealth.

These tax collectors, and sinners in general, weren’t just attracted to Jesus; they weren’t just coming near him. Jesus was welcoming them; he was eating with them.

Sitting around a table with people – sharing a meal with people – presiding as host over that meal was a sign of full acceptance. It was a signal that those in attendance belong. The people a person ate with told the world who that person was. And here was Jesus – a rabbi, a religious teacher, a person daring to speak and teach about God and God’s ways – welcoming and eating with sinners and tax collectors – welcoming and eating with people who clearly had no interest in God or God’s ways.

How could Jesus not realize that in eating with these people – in welcoming them to his table – he was condoning them – he was condoning their behaviour?

Years ago, when I started in ministry, I was in a small, conservative town in which many of the churches agreed that women should not be preachers or pastors. I had a colleague – a woman – who started leading a church in the area and started attending the monthly gathering of local evangelical pastors. These pastors would meet over lunch for a fairly casual time of fellowship and praying together. She didn’t keep attending for long, because when she showed up, a number of the men in the room refused to talk to her. She tells of a day when she sat down at a table and the men at the table literally turned their backs on her. They did it because they were concerned that if they welcomed her – if they ate with her, talked with her – they’d be condoning her as a pastor and preacher. And condoning what they saw as a blatant disrespect for God’s law would make them culpable for her sin.

The Pharisees and scribes grumbling about Jesus welcoming and eating with sinners and tax collectors had the same concerns. They had the same fears. By welcoming and eating with sinners and tax collectors, Jesus was condoning those sinners and tax collectors.

Years ago, I preached a sermon based on the story from John 8:1 – 11. It's a story about a woman caught in adultery and dragged before Jesus. Those who did the dragging didn't care about the woman. They maybe didn't even care about the adultery. What they wanted was to trick Jesus into disobeying God's law, thus justifying their complaints about him. According to them, God's law demanded that this woman be stoned for her sin; they asked Jesus what he had to say about it. Jesus didn't initially say anything. Instead, we're told that he bent down and wrote with his finger in the ground. Eventually, perhaps because the accusers wouldn't stop, Jesus stood back up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And then he bent back down and continued with whatever he was drawing or writing in the dirt. One by one, the accusers dropped their stones and left.

The thing I love most about this story is the way I imagine that Jesus' position bent over the ground put him with the woman. I imagine that she was huddled, low to the ground, doing what she could to cover herself. And I love that Jesus didn't condemn her. I love that Jesus instead protected her.

When I preached the sermon on this story, that was the thing I focused on – Jesus' extraordinary compassion and welcome. But a number of people who heard this sermon didn't like it. They didn't like it because I was connecting it to a particular people group in our day and age that many of them lumped under the same category of sinner as the woman in the story. They didn't like that I focused on Jesus' compassion and welcome, rather than on his final words to the woman.

When everyone had dropped their stones and left, Jesus said to the woman, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She replied, "No one, sir," And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again."

The people who didn't like my sermon wanted me to focus on the "do not sin again" part of it. They wanted me to qualify Jesus' welcome – to make it clear that his welcome included a requirement of repentance – a requirement of changed behaviour.

Jesus absolutely calls us to repentance. Jesus absolutely desires for us to live in ways that are consistent with God's intentions when he made us. BUT his welcome is not contingent on our repentance. His welcome is not limited by our repentance. That was the whole reason the Pharisees and scribes in today's reading from Luke 15 were so frustrated. Jesus was doing things backwards. He was welcoming sinners and tax collectors – he was eating with them – *while they were still sinners*.

So Jesus told them a couple a parables. I'd like to focus on the first.

Jesus asked the grumbling Pharisees and scribes, "Which 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?"

Unlike some of Jesus' parables, this one is pretty straightforward. God is the shepherd. We are the flock. It's a familiar metaphor in the Bible. It would have been familiar to everyone listening to him. And the idea that a shepherd would go in search of a lost sheep wasn't all that shocking

of a suggestion, even if some of Jesus' listeners may have been of the opinion that at least some of those who are lost should stay lost.

What strikes me about this parable is not that the shepherd goes in search of the lost sheep. It's not that when he brings the sheep home, there's a celebration. What strikes me in this parable is that the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine other sheep in order to go in search of the lost one. What strikes me is that he doesn't leave them secure and safe in a pen, he doesn't leave them under the care of another shepherd. He simply leaves them in the wilderness.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, in chapter 5, there's a short story about Jesus' call to Levi, a tax collector, to follow him. In response to Jesus' call, Levi not only left everything to be a disciple, but he also threw a huge banquet for Jesus. It was a banquet full of sinners and tax collectors. And the Pharisees and scribes complained. In response, Jesus said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

In other words, the ninety-nine are fine on their own. They don't need me. So I will go in search of the lost one.

But how can ninety-nine sheep alone in the wilderness be fine? The wilderness is a dangerous place. Shepherds don't just lead the sheep to fresh pastures, they protect them – they fight off the bears and wolves. Leaving the ninety-nine is a huge risk.

Except the ninety-nine – the ones who aren't lost – the Pharisees and scribes – the ones who know God's law – God's ways – and work hard to live righteous lives – they don't think they're in danger. They think they're just fine by themselves. They're pretty sure they know what's required of them and how to do what's required of them. They're pretty sure they aren't lost.

There's a story about a young boy who got lost while at a fair with his mom. His mom searched frantically, calling his name, asking people if they'd seen him. Eventually, she found him. As she wrapped him in her arms, weeping, she said to her boy, "I was so worried. You were lost", to which the boy responded, "I wasn't lost. I knew exactly where I was."

I think that's the mistake Jesus was drawing the Pharisees' and scribes' attention to. They think they're fine. They think there's no danger for them. So when the Shepherd leaves to search out the lost sheep, they're fine to stay where they are.

The Pharisees and scribes grumbled and complained because they didn't think Jesus should be with the sinners and tax collectors. They thought he should be with them – his fellow righteous men. They were concerned that Jesus, sharing a meal with sinners, condoned their sin. They were frustrated that Jesus treated them like they were the undesirables – the unclean – the ones to be avoided.

Except it wasn't Jesus avoiding the scribes and Pharisees. They could have joined him anytime. They would have been just as welcome at Jesus' table as were any of the sinners and tax collectors. But they chose not to be included. They chose to separate themselves from the rabble. They chose to avoid Jesus.

The irony of Jesus' parables in Luke 15 is that it wasn't the shepherd who left the ninety-nine. It was the ninety-nine who chose not to follow the shepherd. And as soon as they weren't in the presence of the shepherd, they actually became the lost ones.

There's a third parable in Luke 15. It's likely one of the most familiar parables Jesus ever told. We know it as the story of the Prodigal Son. In short, it's the story of a self-entitled younger son who's itching to leave home so asks his dad for his share of his inheritance early. The dad gives it to him, and the son leaves home. But when the money is gone, the son's life falls apart and eventually he returns to his father's home. When he gets there, he's surprised by his father's welcome. His father runs to greet him in the road, he throws a party to welcome him home, he clothes him in his finest and feeds him his best. The good son – the oldest son – on the other hand, stayed home and worked the fields. He was faithful to and respectful of his father. And he was not impressed when his brother was welcomed home with open arms and celebration. He refused to join the party. He stayed outside in the cold, alone and bitter.

The fact is that anyone who is not in the presence of the Shepherd is lost. It doesn't matter if that person has lived a righteous life or a sinner's life. To be away from the Shepherd is to be lost.

The Pharisees and the scribes thought they were in the centre of God's presence and will. They thought their attention to holiness – to following God's law – would keep them there. They thought not surrounding themselves with sinners and tax collectors would keep them in God's good grace. But they were wrong.

God is all about seeking the lost. If we want to find God, that's where we'll find him. If we don't want to be lost, then we need to be where he is.

Being lost, and knowing you're lost, is a horrible place to be. It's terrifying. It's disorienting. How incredible to know that we do not need to remain lost? How incredible to be sought by the Good Shepherd. How incredible that it was while we were – are – still sinners that Christ died for us. He didn't wait for us to become righteous, to become perfect, to repent, before he chose to die for us. How incredible that all of us are invited – that all of us are welcome – to Jesus' table, where he serves as the host.