

## **“The Counting, Seeking, Finding, Celebrating Sheep Owner”**

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Luke 13: 29-35 and Luke 15: 1-7

Here's an excerpt about one lost sheep from Frederick Buechner's classic book

*Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale:*

God is the complete comic shepherd who gets more of a kick out of that one lost sheep once he [sic] finds it again than out of the ninety and nine who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place. God is the eccentric host who, when the country-club crowd all turn out to have other things more important to do that come live it up with him, goes out into the skid rows and soup kitchens and charity wards and brings home a freak show. The man with no legs who sells shoelaces at the corner. The old woman in the moth-eaten fur coat who makes her daily rounds of the garbage cans. The old wino with his pint in a brown paper bag. The pusher, the whore, the village idiot who stands at the blinker light waving his hand as the cars go by. They are seated at the damask-laid table in the great hall. The candles are all lit, and the champagne glasses filled. At a sign from the host, the musicians in the gallery strike up “*Amazing Grace*.” If you have to explain it, don't bother.

Now, before we produce all our thoughts about whether Jesus was appropriate with these “lost” people, we might ask ourselves whether we are lost, found or some of both? For our God, if you buy Buchner's interpretation of Jesus' actions, is the “outlandish one who does impossible things with impossible people” and those impossible people might just be us. Thank heaven we have a “counting, seeking, finding, celebrating sheep owner.”

This section of Luke's Gospel is full of Jesus' parables about things that are “lost.” The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. What if, instead, these parables were more accurately titled, “the found sheep, the found coin, and the found son”? Would you think of them differently? Do you struggle with these parables because you are one of the “good”

people, who never strayed from the ways of God (in your own opinion)? Would it be harder to think of these parables if, instead of Jesus hanging with “sinners” –a term we can water down – Jesus was found hanging out with arms dealers, loan sharks, insider traders, or collaborationists with occupation governments? Those would be the modern equivalents of those in Jesus’ audience when this parable of the found sheep was first told. Makes it more real, doesn’t it? We can’t sugar-coat who Jesus’ audience was and therefore how profound these parables of the found were in that setting, and how disturbing they could be in ours.

Each of us make judgments about how is deserving and undeserving of God’s love. We also make judgments about who is “doing it right” when talking about Christianity. I found myself doing the same thing as one of the stories that was suggested I research for this sermon was about a ministry called “Tierra Nueva” in rural Washington state. I was sure it was a feel-good group that has similar theology to mine, doing great ministry with those who have been incarcerated, addicted, and/or immigrants and supports them in becoming leaders in their communities. I went to the website all ready to be awestruck by their ministry.

Then I read a bit and found that their You Tube page was from CBN news: the Christian Broadcasting Network. It’s a chosen news source of mine. Further, I saw the Tierra Nueva has evangelism as part of their mission with these folk on the margin. I almost left it out of the sermon because clearly our theology and practice differ. But then I started thinking here is this evangelistic group that is doing ministry with migrants, the incarcerated, and the addicted. Am I doing that? Are people who are lost being found? While I don’t subscribe to their theology and their politics, what happens to those people if Tierra Nueva isn’t there? I caught myself in my own judgment of another’s ministry that clearly is going out to look for

the one. Their mission statement is Word. Spirit. Street. They carefully read scripture with the effect of helping marginalized people hear the Good News of God's love. The Holy Spirit empowers the ministry. The street is a strong commitment to the social prophetic, speaking truth to power, empowering people to have a voice, to address the structural dimension of injustice and oppression.

I don't agree with everything they do, but that last part about truth to power, empowering people's voices, and addressing the structures stacked against the marginalized? Those are things I think are vitally important. Further, it got me thinking.

Father Richard Rohr tells us that "God never gives up on those who have forgotten God's love (*Daily Meditations, November 26, 2024*)."

He goes on to tell us that in these stories from Luke's Gospel, the lostness isn't trivial. The search in the parable is not a show. What is lost is truly lost—even though the seeker is God. He continues:

God is where the lost things are. God is in the wilderness; God is in the remotest corners of the house. God is where the search is at its fiercest. If I want to find God, I have to seek the lost. I have to get lost. I have to leave the safety of the inside to venture out. I have to recognize my own lostness and **consent** (emphasis mine) to be found.

What do you mean by my own lostness? Every author I read this week, and everything I know about people, is that all of us are on the spectrum of lost and found all the time. Sometimes, we get it, and we act just like Jesus would have us act. Other times, we think we have it all and spend our time looking at someone else and comparing them to ourselves just to make ourselves look better. And other times, we know we're lost, and we can't find our way out of a paper bag. Most of the time, though, when we are most lost, we hide it. We think if we play the game that we are good, faithful, trustworthy, churchgoing, caring people, then

everyone will know we are found, while at the same time spending much of our lives spinning in lostness.

“God looks for us when our lostness is so convoluted and so profound, we can’t even pretend to look good,” writes Rohr. “Even in such bleak hopelessness, God finds us. This is amazing grace. And it is ours.”

I remember one of the great hymn controversies during my ministries about the song *Amazing Grace*. People hated that the word “wretch” was in there. They’d say, “I’m no wretch,” Clearly, that was in comparison to someone who they thought was. Someone who is really lost...not like us.

The Good News of the Gospel is that even though we often think differently of ourselves than God does, when we are most blinded by our own actions or thoughts, this is exactly when God goes to find us, too. In many church settings, “lost” and “found” language has sometimes been used to wound or shame those people who have “strayed from the flock.” The truth is that we all travel the spectrum of lost and found at various points in our lives; I hope this week can be an invitation to consider where you are on that spectrum, and where God might be seeking you in your midst.

I know it’s a long sermon title this week, but I did it on purpose, and I borrowed it from someone I read this week, but I can’t recall who. But here’s what I know: To God, you count. God will always be seeking you, no matter whether you’ve figured out you need to be sought or not. God will find you, no matter where you are. And, most importantly, God will celebrate your return. And that’s also true for everyone else, even those people you have deemed not

to be doing it right, or beyond redemption, or too “bull headed” or whatever else we’ve decided. Our God is a counting, seeking, finding, celebrating God. And you don’t need much more than Luke Chapter 15 to remind you that this is true.

With God, it really is true that “no matter who you are, or where you are on life’s journey” ...God is there. God is there when no one else is. God is there when we can’t be. God is there when we choose not to be. God is there somehow and in some way we will never understand. For them...and for us. As Father Rohr reminds us, “This is amazing grace. And it is ours.”

Amen.