

*Lost, Found, and, Sometimes in the Way*

Years ago, I had the occasion to return to the parish I served in Scotland. When I wrote to the pastor to ask if I might visit, she replied that the Kildrum Parish had opened its doors to a group called *Causeway Prospects*. This group is a Christian organization concerned with, in their own words, "Working together with individuals with learning disabilities to insure they can lead fulfilled lives." Elinor wrote me that the clients of Causeway Prospects would be leading worship that day and so I should expect skits.

The texts they were to act out are our texts for today: The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. As their advocates and teachers shepherded these adults gently in to the chancel, some wore their condition visibly, such as those with Down Syndrome, while others did not. Some looked impoverished and some looked quite wealthy.

There was one woman stood off to the side, probably about 55 years old, beautifully dressed and impeccably coiffed. She was so well put together that I assumed she was one of the caregivers until she stood still awkwardly at one point until her friend came and took her by the hand and led her to where the others had moved. They read the stories about the lost and found and acted them out.

I need to share with you an insight that I am embarrassed to admit hit me *like a thunderbolt*.

As I was watched, it became evident to me that there was a variety of economic prosperity represented. My mind wandered a bit and I began to contemplate the reality that if one's abilities are at certain level, economic hardship is an obstacle that may be overcome, or so we are taught. But if one's abilities lie elsewhere and one's brain processes information more slowly or in different ways, that might not be still be true. The advantages and disadvantages of class become all the more evident where disability was concerned.

But that's not the great insight. We all know that, or we should.

As I sat in the pew, thinking of *lost* and *found* and who will seek the lost sheep, my mind grazed over to how profoundly unfair it is that for those without advocates, the best you can get is the best the system offers, regardless of whether the system works or not. Then I started thinking about the kingdom of God. As I sat there, I thought to myself, "Well, no doubt this is all true. But surely there is some comfort in the knowledge that in the kingdom, all will be made whole."

But that's not the thunderbolt either. It's a little too convenient sometimes to push things that we ought to be engaged in off to an eventual kingdom of God.

As I kept watching, I thought about a little girl I know who has Down Syndrome, and I thought, “Well, what does *whole* look like for her? Wouldn’t that fundamentally change who she is?”

And that is when the thunderbolt hit me: “Who said *she’s* the one who needs to be changed for this to be made whole?”

Suddenly, I had a different perspective on who was lost.

Theologically *wholeness* is about the restoration of shalom, or God’s reign of peace and justice. We all know all that too, or we should. But, it is awfully easy to slip into thinking of the categories of “lost” and “found” based, not on a vision of the kingdom, but on what would be the easiest. It was much tougher to think of what God’s *wholeness* would demand of you and me.

These parables are stories about great joy because they are about restoration, and it is very tempting to locate ourselves in the parables. I think it’s unavoidable, really. We are people who relate to ourselves and others through *story* and so when we encounter a parable, it’s really tempting to assign parts: Lost, found, and Pharisee.

At a facile glance, the part of finder goes to Jesus. The part of coin/sheep goes to the sinners, and the part of the Pharisees will be played today by... well, that’s you and me. We’re the audience.

So, the lost are the sinners, the found are the saints and the Pharisees... well, we can either lump them in with the sinners or else just assume they are in the way.

That’s an easy interpretation, but if that is the way we interpret it, then these are parables dripping with judgmentalism, and that’s not grace and it certainly isn’t joy.

So, let’s take another crack at understanding these parables. Perhaps *we’re* the lost. Or maybe we’re the found. At times we might be the *seeker* (or at least the one working for the seeker) and at other times, we’re the *sought*.

And, grace being grace and not something of our own doing, every once in a while, we’re just taking up space, and God is up to something we haven’t figured out yet.

I wonder sometimes if we don’t rather enjoy being lost? If we are lost, then we’re not responsible for our lack of direction. We’re lost. Jesus is going to find us. And when he does, we’ll have the great joy of being found.

There’s a whole thread of revivalist preaching that riffs along this theme: You’re miserable sinners but Jesus loves you and if you accept him into your heart (maybe for the umpteenth time) you can be found! (Again.)

Let’s look at that critically for a second. First, it makes being found an action on the part of the lost. Second, it treats the condition of *lostness* trivially.

Being lost – being fundamentally disoriented, unable to see the right way out, unable to retrieve oneself from the condition of sin – that’s not something to be glib about. *Lostness* is when the conditions required to pull oneself out are more than one could ever reasonably manage alone. Addiction can be lostness. Homelessness can be lostness. Loneliness can be lostness. Being lost is real, and any rescue from being lost is grace.

We trivialize lostness and the accompanying grace when we act like sinners are the source of their own problems. To be sure, self-destructive behavior abounds and we do bear responsibility for our bad actions. But grace – being found - isn’t about saving ourselves, *grace is about the transformative in-breaking of God’s kindness.*

Before we move on to the concept of being “found,” let’s touch once more on that idea that we’re all lost.

Because we are.

Sin is, at its heart, the rejection and breaking of *Shalom*, or God’s peaceable, just vision for the world. We all participate in it, whether we want to or not. So, sin isn’t just lying, cheating, stealing and committing adultery, though those activities certainly qualify – sin is primarily participation in a system that is fundamentally unjust and unpeaceful, and therefore, *fundamentally broken*. If we are honest about God’s vision for creation, we know that as long as violence and poverty persist, this isn’t it.

We are all lost, in need of being found our whole lives long. That’s why Reinhold Niebuhr reminded us that we sin in our best deeds as well as our worst. That is why sitting in that Scottish Church, it was I who had, in fact, missed the point.

*Only when we come to grips with our own sin can we talk to others about being found.*

You know my working definition of grace: Grace is the unmerited, undeserved, unconditional love of God. Nothing we do causes it, nothing we do can escape it... God decided to love us and to do so unconditionally. Its why we are simultaneously lost and found, simultaneously sinner and saint. Grace is not a commodity about which we may boast, as Paul says, but a gift to share. That is why we who are lost and found, can ultimately be seekers on behalf of the one who sought us: Because grace is not about what we’ve done, grace is always about what God is doing.

Being found means God’s grace flows through us when we are doing God’s work, seeking those who need aid, and finding in ourselves, somewhere, the ability to offer what aid is needed with kindness and humility.

What a profound calling.

What are you doing about it? Let’s ask ourselves plainly: If grace is real, then what are we doing about it?

Which brings me to the final vantage point from which to consider this parable, which is the vantage point of being *in the way*.

Nothing would please me more than to say that the church is never, ever in the way of grace. It would please me, but it would not be true and you would know it. The condition of being simultaneously lost and found, sinner and saint, means that we aren't perfect. And that means sometimes our attempts to mediate grace might just wind up, well, being in the way of God. Remember, we sin in our best deeds as well as our worst.

Admittedly, this is a pessimistic way to look at things.

But think about it this way: Do we *always* do what God calls us to do?

When the answer is no, however banal our reasons might be, that's *sin*. That's *being lost*.

The inbreaking of the kingdom, of God's grace, is how we are found. And if grace is real, what are we doing about it?

You see, when Jesus told these stories, it was to the Pharisees.

Those poor old Pharisees, they've been so maligned.

I'm being quite serious. They weren't trying to be difficult... in fact, the very fact that Jesus talks to them so often suggests to some that they were perhaps the closest conversation partners Jesus had... they legitimately wanted to be good, they wanted to live faithfully, and they wanted to know why Jesus was associating with sinners!

It's plenty easy to make them the mustache-twisting villains of the Gospel. But that's not true. They wanted to make faith *doable* by making it methodical. They were trying to be faithful and to help others to be faithful. In the process... they got in the way, probably because God's grace is so intent on coloring outside the lines that it can ever be made formulaic.

It's painfully easy to be in the way of grace. It just takes one thing: assuming that our mind is the mind of God and our ways are the ways of God. We must always test our vision – both as a church and in our own lives – against the measure of the Gospel.

Faithful living means that the Church needs to be *ahead* of the curve of culture, not behind it. Not reacting to circumstances by pedantically pedaling moralism like those poor Pharisees, but instead, laying out a vision of God's grace, *God's abundant, transforming, overflowing grace*.

Did you know one of the earliest names for Christians was we were *the followers of the way*?

I've always loved that because does away with the idea that we're supposed to have *arrived* already and acknowledges that there are many twists and turns in faith, and the occasional dead-end.

Do you know the best way not to be in the way of God's grace?

It is for the church to be the needle on the compass of culture pointing toward God's grace. Perhaps the best way to avoid being *in* the way is to be *on* the way.

When the grace of God flows through us, that's church at its best; as we tell the story of God's grace and point the way *home*.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.