



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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SEPTEMBER 11, 2016
THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 15:1-10; I Timothy 1:12-17
What Are You Looking For?

Do you sometimes feel as if you are always looking for something? A few years ago, the British paper *Daily Mail* reported on a survey done for the home insurance company Esure. That survey of 3,000 Brits indicated that, on average, people spend about ten minutes a day looking for something they have misplaced or lost. Over a lifetime, that amounts to roughly 153 days spent searching for things we can't find.¹

Last year, *The New York Daily News*, reported on a study by a tracking company known as Pebblebee which discovered that one in five adults in America lose or misplace a personal belonging each week.² Honestly, I was surprised by that statistic because I personally know more than one in five people who get *themselves* lost each week, not counting all the things they can't find otherwise! There was one more study I wanted to share about the amount of time we spend searching for things we have misplaced, but after an hour or so of looking, I still couldn't find it.

We look for a lot of things: keys, wallets, gloves, hats, glasses, phones . . . cars. We tend to misplace a lot of things. One thing I have learned over the years is that no matter what we are searching for, we will find it in the last place we look!

Jesus seems to have understood our propensity for losing things and told a few stories about looking and finding. Listen to a couple of them:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-

¹Daily Mail Reporter, "Lost Something Already Today? Misplaced Items Cost Us Ten Minutes a Day," *Daily Mail* (March 20, 2012); available online at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2117987/Lost-today-Misplaced-items-cost-minutes-day.html>.

²"Lost Items Cost Americans \$5,591," *New York Daily News* (May 27, 2015); available online at: <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/lost-items-cost-americans-5-591-survey-article-1.2237244>.

nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”
Luke 15:1-10

Everyone but the Pharisees would have smiled and nodded at hearing these stories. They knew that the shepherd and the woman represented God who would always rejoice when a sinner was found and redeemed. They believed God would go out of his way to look for a wayward soul. But they also knew that no wise shepherd would leave ninety-nine sheep unguarded to go look for one careless sheep that had wandered off. And while every one of the people in the crowd would have done what the woman did and search high and low until they found that coin which was worth a day's work, they would not spread the word in the neighborhood. They would put it back in its hiding place and make sure it didn't get lost again. Apparently God has a different perspective on looking and finding.

So, what are you looking for? In addition to things that we have misplaced, we also look for things that interest us: news, information, music, art, entertainment, and so forth. That kind of looking involves a certain level of involvement and activity. At minimum, we have to turn on the TV or radio or computer. We may have to open a book, pick up the paper, or drive to a library or museum.

Then there are those things we look for because they are important for our well-being. Whether we want to admit it or not, money is probably at the top of that list. At some point, we all look for money, whether it is simply to have enough to survive or to meet the next unexpected need or to build up a little nest egg or to have as much as we can get our hands on. To some extent, we are like that woman who lost one of her silver coins. We are going

to look high and low, prepare ourselves for a career, try out a number of different jobs, start a business of our own, buy a lottery ticket, take out a loan, cut back on expenses, and do whatever is necessary to have the funds we need to live the life we want to live. Our question has to be, what we are looking for and why?

Generally our work is important to us and we spend a lot of time and effort looking for the right job or the best career. Hallmark movies are known for portraying characters who eventually leave a high paying job in New York or Los Angeles to return to their small hometowns to teach school, take over the family business, or otherwise put their skills and passion to work in a meaningful way. However, those scenarios are not found in movie scripts alone; You and I know people who make career changes because they have spent years looking for a way to spend their time and use their talents for more than merely making money. What are you looking for?

We look for ways to spend our leisure time doing things that are fun or will enrich our lives. Hobbies like gardening, woodworking, painting, sculpting, or making music tap into our creative abilities and allow us to express ourselves in new ways. Even if we do not create anything ourselves but spend our time enjoying and appreciating the talents of other people, we are enriched . . . and so are they. We look for meaning and expression in our lives and often find it in tangible ways. What are you looking for?

We also look for ways to make a difference in the world around us. Many of you have found fulfillment through belonging to a civic club, volunteering with a local ministry, or serving on a non-profit board. You recognize the many needs in our community and the ways that your skills can be put to use. Thanks to your efforts and the contributions of thousands of people in our community, many lives are enriched and living conditions are improved. From time to time, some of us take such service a step further and seek election to a leadership position locally, in our state, or on a national level. In such cases, it is always our prayer that candidates for public office are looking out for the best interests of all citizens and not simply looking out for themselves. What are you looking for?

Some people are looking for even larger prizes: justice and fairness for all people, protection of the most vulnerable people in our society, or the preservation of our natural resources. Some people are looking for world peace. What are you looking for?

Many of us are looking for another person. Perhaps it is a partner, a companion, or a spouse we yearn for, someone to explore life with us. Maybe we are looking for friends to fill some of the empty spaces in our lives. Many of us have looked for a child who has become prodigal in one dangerous and self-destructive way or another. When relationships grow stale, we look for the person we once loved. When parents age, we look for the hero we used to know. When we realize that we are not the person we had hoped to become, we look for ourselves and pray desperately to be found.

What are you looking for? Like Garrison Keelor's longsuffering private eye Guy Noir, you may be "looking for the answers to life's persistent questions." Aren't we all to some extent? We want to turn around and chase those questions that dog us and nip at our heels. Questions like why is there suffering in the world? What is the source of evil? Why do some people do such mean and cruel things? Does prayer really work? Does God really listen? Who is God? Where is God? Where are we?

Fifteen years ago at this hour, we were all in a state of shock, eyes fixed upon television screens, hearts in our throats. We saw things we never imagined could happen here: people running in terror in the streets of New York, airplanes crashing into buildings, buildings collapsing in a heap of rubble, thousands of lives lost. Fifteen years later we know who and what, but we do not really know why. I doubt we will ever find the answer to that question, but we continue to look for the answer. And we look for how we can prevent such an atrocity in the future.

Jesus told his listeners that a shepherd once left ninety-nine sheep and went looking for one that was lost. When he found it, he put it on his shoulders and rejoiced. He said there once was a woman who lost a coin. She searched and searched until she found it and then shared her good news with her friends. There once was a son who lost his way. When he found himself and went home, his father threw a party. Jesus also said,

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Matthew 13:44-46

If we are eager to look long and hard for things that we think will give us happiness or security or pleasure here on earth, shouldn't we also be looking for those things that are going to provide us with eternal joy? If we will look for the lamb because it is a source of our livelihood, if we will hunt for the coin because it is our financial security, why not also look for the things that truly enrich our lives? Why not seek the things that offer us security now and forever?

One of the purposes of the Church, of this church, is to help us in our search for meaning and purpose. Together we ask the perplexing questions of life and help one another find the best answers. We support one another as we search and we rejoice with one another when discoveries are made. Together we look for God in our lives and celebrate when he is found right in our midst. Most important, we acknowledge that we are a flock of lost lambs who have wandered off in various ways and need to be found and brought back to the fold. We discover that while we are looking for those things we believe are important to life, God is also looking for us.

The irony in the incident between Jesus and the Pharisees who were criticizing him for welcoming known sinners and even dining with them is that the Pharisees were also the lost lambs for whom Jesus was looking. They were the misplaced coin which the woman valued and would not stop looking until she found it.

It is important to ask ourselves what we are looking for and whether those things are of true value or not. It is also important to realize that while we are out searching for things we have lost or think we need, God in Christ is out looking for us because he values and loves us. What are you looking for? Are you willing to be found?

September 11, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We know, O God, that your Church, the fellowship of your people, is planted firmly upon your Living Word who is Jesus Christ our Lord. We are grateful for this family of faith where we are nurtured and nourished throughout life and where we learn to serve others as we have so graciously been served.

We thank you for every good gift that has come our way for we know that all goodness comes from your loving hand. We pause to think of the simple blessings we have already experienced today, and we find the imprint of your love all over our lives. We are well aware of the significant ways you have blessed us and we are grateful for all the ways you shower us with your grace.

Our lives are marked by many experiences, O God, and the fifteen year old memories of September 11 are forever scratched into our lives. We know that much healing has taken place, and we are thankful for it. We also know that a great deal of woundedness and hatred persists. Continue to help us search for answers and to find them. Help us also to discover the grace which will bring us all closer together and serve all peddlers of terror with justice and reveal to them the life of love and mercy which you have shown to us. Continue to heal us all, we pray, and to find ways to change our world for good.

Merciful God, heal our own illnesses, diseases, and wounds whether of the body, mind, or spirit. Renew our lives so that we might help foster new life in the world. And thank you for those people whom you have called to protect and nurture us.

We ask for your blessing upon this fellowship as we begin a new season of activities and opportunities. Open our minds and hearts to fresh understanding and renewed convictions. Guide us to give our lives fully to the work of your Gospel here and throughout the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.