



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

SEPTEMBER 23, 2018
THE EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Happy To Be Found
Ephesians 1:1-22; Luke 15:8-10

I vividly remember a Sunday about fifteen years ago when our choir sang an anthem as stirring and profound as the one we just heard. McClain Wallace was sitting up front with his daughter who was the acolyte that day. As the choir finished the anthem and the music of their voices and the organ were still swirling around the sanctuary and in our hearts, before I got up to step into the pulpit, I caught McClain's eye and he sort of nodded and raised his eyebrows as if to say, "Try to top that!" Today, after hearing two stirring anthems and the generous words of Vel and Theo, I feel the same way. There is no way to top it.

The truth is that week by week, as I sit here and look around and see each of you and think about who you are and what you do and the ways in which you live out the Gospel, I know that there is no way to top the witness you bear daily. The best I can do is offer a little perspective to lives well lived.

Thank you, Vel and Theo, for your kind words and your very generous memories. Thank you, our choir, for the gift of music and inspiration you offer us every week. Thank you, Amy, Elizabeth, and Susan, Linda, Liz, Milton, and Rachel, for being creative and energetic partners in ministry and for caring about what we do and the people we serve. Certainly, I am grateful to the members of the Search Committee who believed that I offered something that might benefit this congregation. And thank you, our Lakeside family, for trusting me with your spiritual care these past two decades. I have received much more than I have given, and I have given far less than you deserve. But you have graciously helped me to grow and mature and have welcomed my attempts to be what you needed. Thank you.

As we talked about this occasion, I told Theo that the focus today would be the worship of God because that is why we are here and, as I have said many times, it is the most important thing we do because our worship informs and influences everything else that we do. So hear this good story of the Gospel as told by Luke. Jesus said:

“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 15:8-10

I know that this parable, unique to Luke, is about the joy God feels when one of us is brought back into relationship with God. It is one of three parables Jesus tells in succession about “the lost.” When the Pharisees grumble among themselves about how Jesus is hanging out with a bunch of sinners, he tells three parables to put them in their place: the parable of the lost sheep, the story about the lost coin, and the drama about the lost son (who might well be either the Prodigal or the elder son). These stories are about the various ways in which we get “lost” from God and how God either comes looking for us or waits patiently for us to return. The emphasis, however, is on the reaction of God when one of us is finally found and is once again in our “right” place.

The story of the lost coin is about God’s persistent search for us, but what is so striking is the sense of joy that erupts when the coin is found. You and I lose things all the time: money, car keys, glasses, phones, or the remote. When we find whatever it is that we have lost, we are certainly happy. We might even whisper a prayer of gratitude, but we quickly get on with whatever we are doing. This woman, however, was exuberant! Not only was she happy that she had found the coin; she threw a party to celebrate! She invited all of her friends and neighbors and rejoiced over her good fortune. It sounds a bit extreme to me. If you and I threw a party every time we found something we had lost, we would do nothing but party.

Joy and gratitude! Those are the emotions that Jesus highlights in this parable which explains how happy God is when any one of us comes back home. Whether we wander off like a sheep, deliberately take off like the Prodigal, choose to stay out of the picture like the elder brother, or simply get misplaced in the shuffle of life like the coin, God is delighted when we come home and are back in our place. On the other side of the story, I suspect that the sheep, the Prodigal, and even the coin (if coins had emotions) are happy to be found so that they can fulfill their purpose in life. That is why this parable resonates with us: each and every one of us longs to “be found,” to

be in a place where we are known and loved, encouraged and challenged. Once we are found, or find our rightful place in life, we are happy and grateful.

Today I feel much joy and gratitude to have “been found” by you. Deborah and I are grateful for each of the congregations that have welcomed and included us, appreciated our gifts, helped us to discover new abilities, and loved us through whatever came our way. Our children are blessed by the nurture of three churches that have loved them in more ways than ever I could imagine.

Generally we call the process by which a congregation and a minister become connected a “search.” For most of my career, I have thought of that term simply as one that the church has borrowed from the secular world. A church goes searching for a minister while at the same time a minister is searching for a church. When they meet up, well and good!

Now I know that when the process is done well, it is much more like the parable of the lost coin. Churches and ministers search, not for what has been lost, but for what they long for and desire. When each is found, there is true rejoicing. That is how I feel today, twenty years after we found each other.

This searching and finding is what church is all about. It is the essence of faith. Each of us is looking for something that is missing in our lives, some piece of ourself that is out of place. We want to be known and loved for who we are. And God, who knows exactly what he is searching for, feels that same sense of incompleteness as long as one of his sheep, or coins, or children is out of place. God goes looking, peeking into dusty corners, shining a light in dark spaces, reaching under the cushions of life to find us in all of those places we tend to hide. And when God’s care-worn fingers brush against the contours of our lives, he gleefully scoops us up and celebrates as if he has found gold—for in God’s heart, he has.

We are all searching for home, for the place where we truly belong, and God is searching for us in order to bring us home to our rightful place. Church is one such place where God and his people rejoice when we find each other. Family and friends who know and love us, work where we find fulfillment and purpose, community involvement that calls for the best in us, and times of calm and contentment when we feel at peace are all places where we know we belong. They are places where God’s grace finds us time and time again.

John O'Donohue has written a poem intended as a blessing for a new house. For me, it is also a blessing for Lakeside and any other place where God finds us. Listen carefully and whenever you hear the words "house" or "home" or "place," think "church" or "work" or "family" or "friends." Think about the places where you have been found and the people who have truly known and loved you for who you are. Think of all the places where God has found you and hear this blessing as a prayer for your life. Offer it as a prayer for Lakeside:

May this house shelter your life.
When you come in home here,
May all of the weight of the world
Fall from your shoulders.

May your heart be tranquil here,
Blessed by peace the world cannot give.

May this home be a lucky place,
Where the graces of your desires
Always find the pathway to your door.

May nothing destructive
Ever cross your threshold.

May this be a safe place
Full of understanding and acceptance,
Where you can be as you are,
Without the need of any mask
Of pretense or image.
May this home be a place of discovery,
Where the possibilities that sleep
In the clay of your soul can emerge
To deepen and refine your vision
For all that is yet to come to birth.

May it be a house of courage,
Where healing and growth are loved,
Where dignity and forgiveness prevail;
A home where patience of spirit is prized,
And the sight of the destination is never lost
Though the journey be difficult and slow.
May there be great delight around this hearth.
May it be a house of welcome
For the broken and diminished.

May you have the eyes to see
That no visitor arrives without a gift
And no guest leaves without a blessing.¹

May this congregation continue to be a place where we are all happy
and grateful to be found. Amen.

¹John O'Donohue, "For a New Home," in *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 19-20.

September 23, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Week by week, month by month, year after year, lifetime upon lifetime, we gather in this good place, O God, to ask for your blessing and to offer our gratitude. We seek life that is full and complete, abundant in opportunities and content with whatever we need. We thank you for the ceaseless gifts that come our way and for the insight to recognize your grace in gifts large and small.

Our small slice of the world has been upended by Hurricane Florence and the waters that have overwhelmed homes, businesses, schools, houses of worship, and places of recreation. The storm took life, brought damage, and caused great hardship for many people and we all need your help. Help us to resist the notion that you had anything to do with such a tragedy other than being near to everyone adversely affected. Keep us from the temptation of thinking that such horror is a means of chastening us to a better life. Free us from the burden of believing that this kind of disaster indicates that you do not care. Instead, open us to the many revelations of your love that shine through the clouds and reach beneath the waters to help us all live fully again.

We pray for each of us who has special needs and for all who suffer challenges of body, mind, and spirit. Be for us what we cannot be for ourselves and bring us to the best resources for healing and wholeness, we pray.

We thank you, our God, for this family of faith which nurtures our faith and challenges it day by day. We thank you for all of the loyal souls who preceded us here and for their good witness to your love. We thank you for the calling to be the Body of Christ on this corner in this community. Continue to inspire us, we pray. Continue to equip us for ministry. And continue to call us to live the Gospel day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, and lifetime by lifetime. Live through us, Lord of life, and make our hearts your home; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.