

Sermon – 14th Pentecost

Luke 15:1-10

September 15, 2019

"Hide n Seek – God’s Version"

When my brother’s girls were small, my mom and I babysat them and we would play with ‘*little Melissa and Heather.*’ Their favorite game was “*hide n seek*”. But mom and I discovered that little kids don’t like to stay hidden ... at least not my brother’s kids. Mom and I would come in the room where we more or less knew one of them was, but to prolong the game a bit we’d walk up to the hall closet that was slightly ajar (a dead give-away), linger a few seconds, even pretend to peek inside, and say nice and loud “*no, she’s not here*”. We’d take no more than a few steps from the closet when this little voice would say, “*yes I am!*”!

The notion that if you’re not found you win made no sense to them. Being lost is not all fun and games of course. A few years ago in my home state of Minnesota the name Jacob Wetterling was back in the news – to the entire state’s profound sadness. Not all that long after my nieces grew out of playing hid and seek, residents of Minnesota were asked on billboards and milk cartons if they’d seen Jacob. I doubt there can be a more isolating horror in life for a parent than to call for a child, as Jacob’s did for weeks and months, and not have them say “*here I am*”.

The calendar this week reminded us why 911 isn’t just a three-digit number you call to report an emergency. In the agonizing hours of and after September 11, 2001 the families of Andrea Haberman of Kewaskum and Scott Johnson of Kenosha, on business trips to New York, called their cell phones all day, and of course, we now know they would never answer. Those makeshift signboards erected near ground zero with people’s pictures on them asking passersby “have you seen _____” are one of the images of 9/11 that I remember most vividly.

The game of hide and seek I played with my nieces was fun, but losing a loved one is no child’s play. Many of you know the story of Job – a man who experienced great losses. Job wasn’t passive about it. Job was no patient sufferer – he was a passionate sufferer. Job insisted on getting to the bottom of why he’d lost so much. He was not content with conventional wisdom that said just accept it – or that suffering was the product of unacknowledged sin – the explanation his friends had offered. In the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin God is that passionate sufferer. He is not content with losing anyone – nor with those who might opine that “*they got lost – they can find their way back*”, or “*in life you lose a few.*”

In his explanation of the 6th petition of the Lord’s Prayer – “*lead us not into temptation*”, Luther says we ask in this prayer “*that God would watch over us and keep us, so that the devil, the world and our sinful self would not deceive us and draw us into false belief, despair, and other great and shameful sins.*” Luke 15 shows us how determined God is to answer that very prayer he taught us to pray. God suffers when even one of us is lost in sin, false belief, or despair. In God’s thinking there is no

winning if we remain hidden – in God’s arithmetic one in a hundred is no less valuable than one in ten – because it’s “the one” that matters – and you’re that one.

The phrases in our lesson “*until he finds it...until she finds it*” express an intensity of God for ‘*that one*’. *Until...* is a long time, is it not? Patty and Jerry Wetterling, the parents of Jacob would tell you that’s how it is though – parents don’t rest...until. Kids know that the fun in a game of hide and seek is in being found. The parables in Luke 15 tell us that for God the joy is in the finding - in holding again what he loves – that little you. Notice these parables give no clue as to how a sheep wandered or a coin rolled off because the cause of separation doesn’t matter...if it separates us from God, the search is on.

So what are we to conclude from these stories? First of all, that the mercy of God is irrational and extravagant. There is no point where we can believe ourselves so insignificant that the search for us or for anyone we’d say is a lost cause has been called off. Second, whether we are hiding under sin, drifting in passive faith, or abducted by outright unbelief, the rejoicing of heaven is real and judgment of God totally absent. It doesn’t matter to Jesus where you’ve been, what you’ve done, who you’ve hurt or how much you hurt - you’re found, that’s all that matters.

A final thought about numbers. It’s one thing to think of yourself as “*the one*”, or to be reminded, even if it hurts, of how you’re limping along as someone who “*has lost someone*.” In your hurt may you know the love of God for them and his compassion for you. But it’s also important to think of yourself – ourselves, as part of the 9, or the 99. Jesus could have said “*a shepherd lost a sheep or a woman lost a coin*” and leave it at that. But Jesus tells of a flock of 100 sheep and a purse of 10 coins.

It *isn't* that the 9 or the 99 are expendable – but that they are more valuable than they know because they allow the shepherd, the homeowner, to do some searching for the lost one even if it means eyes taken off of them. And who then give the shepherd, the owner, a place to return them. To be part of the 99 - the church - takes humility and prayer – else in our pride we’d move on from folks who went and got themselves lost!

The parables of Luke 15 teach that when God forms a search party for a sinner, it’s in order to restore “*that one*” to where they have even greater value and more protection – in the community of sinners called the church. The lone sheep or coin is valuable enough to be searched for, true, but the real rejoicing begins in heaven and the real work commences in the congregation or home when they’re back. I learned long ago with my nieces that kids simply don’t like being lost for very long. There’s no winning in remaining hidden. If you’re ever tempted to conclude that God is not interested in you, Jesus the relentless shepherd, and Jesus the fastidious housewife would tell you...“*oh yes I am*”. AMEN