



“Working at the Lost and Found”

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Luke 15:1-10 (NRSV)***

I don't know about you, but I had quite a variety of jobs in my younger years—jobs that provided me with a lot of character-building experiences and sermon-writing illustrations for the past twenty-five years.

As a youth, I worked in the fields and babysat for family and friends.

During my college years, I worked for the Dean of Campus Life and was a Resident Assistant in the women's dormitory. I also served as a teacher and preacher in nearby churches.

In seminary, I joined the President and Dean of Students' staff, and served in a local church, and during the summers, I worked first as a paralegal in a large corporate law firm, and later as a hospital chaplain.

Each of these jobs helped pay the bills and prepared me for my current vocation—even if on the surface these jobs did not all seem related to parish ministry.

In the summer between my first and second year of college, for example, I worked a crazy schedule doing three jobs that supported (and reinforced) my goal to finish college, and that gave me a lot of exposure to people and situations that I'd never encountered before. My jobs that summer included working as a night security guard at a Jewish resort, working as the head of housekeeping at my college during the day, and serving as the hotel manager for the college on the weekends.

Lakeland College, my under graduate *alma mater*, ran a hotel business, in conjunction with “Road America,”¹ a racetrack located just 10 miles away in northeast Wisconsin. Road America is part of the NASCAR circuit.

Lakeland rented dorm rooms to Road America guests during the summer months, and as a result attracted a very eclectic crowd. Some guests were pit crew members who

¹ <http://www.roadamerica.com/>

pulled engines apart and worked on them in the dormitory bathrooms, which my housekeeping crew had to clean when they checked out.

Other guests were budget travelers, including the pit crews' family members who followed their spouses around the country all summer. The women and children were typically young, attractive, and poor. Life on the road seemed hard for them, but as one wife and mother explained to me, "At least our family is together."

Still other guests included members of motorcycle gangs who traveled from the four directions to watch the races. They were a tough-looking bunch with lots of leather and chains, and no helmets. (The pre-med students called them "organ donors.")

Other summer guests included wealthy patrons from suburban Chicago, who seem to have arrived on a whim. They drove expensive sports cars, and realized too late that they should have made a hotel reservation before leaving home, since the only reason they were sleeping in dorm rooms was because the regular hotels were booked up.

We had quite an assortment of summer guests at Lakeland College back in the day and, as a consequence, we had quite an assortment of things left behind.

The school's policy was that anything left behind was to be delivered to the lost and found at the campus center, where items could be claimed by their rightful owners.

Much to my surprise, guests rarely attempted to reclaim lost items. As a result, our lost and found collection grew exponentially over the summer. Our treasure trove at the campus center included items such as: caps and clothing with product logos, a can of WD-40, several mechanic's tools, degreaser, some NASCAR magazines, road maps, lottery tickets, women's lingerie, dirty socks, half-empty toiletry bottles, a picnic cooler, soiled grease rags, a traveling alarm clock, and an insulated coffee cup.

At the end of the summer, as we prepared for the students' return, I asked my boss what we should do with the lost and found items, since they were cluttering up the registration area and would not likely be reclaimed.

My boss told me to give the summer staff first dibs on the lost and found items, and to toss the rest in the trash.

The irony to me in working at the lost and found was that very few people reclaimed anything that we recovered. It seemed that either the owners didn't realize their items were missing, or they had no idea where they had lost their property, so that they didn't even try to reclaim their belongings.

II

My experience of working at the lost and found was and is a kind of commentary on today's gospel reading about the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

Like the items we collected at the college lost and found, most of us feel lost at some point or another, and may not realize where or how we got that way. Most of us also fail to realize that we are found, or, if we do, we are slow to embrace this news.

Luke illustrates in chapter 15 that God has already found us. In fact, Luke is showing and telling us that we worship a God who (metaphorically speaking) owns and operates a cosmic lost and found that's open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. And, unlike the rest of us, God keeps track of us even if we are disoriented, or don't know that we've gone off course.

Like all the stuff that my colleagues collected from the dorms during the summer, we sit in the found department. We are found. The challenge, then, is not getting found; the challenge is to embrace the truth that we are found.

III

The news that we are found eludes many of us, for several reasons.

One reason is that the dominant culture we live in is full of seekers. In the 1980s, for example, sociologists of religion dubbed the largest cohort in our society, Baby Boomers, the "Seeker Generation."

At Eden, we have a book discussion group called "Seekers," and pride ourselves in being part of a church and denomination that encourages and supports individuals and groups in their spiritual searching. And that's all good. But let's push the "pause button" for a moment, and consider that you and I are not only seekers, but that we are also (and perhaps more importantly) the ones being sought after.

In the parable of the lost sheep, we are not the shepherd. God is. We are the sheep. In the parable of the lost coin, we are not the housekeeper. God is. We are the coin. We are not the seekers. We are the sought after and the found.

Other reasons why we miss the memo that we are found follow. For example, we may miss the message that we are found because, our lives emulate NASCAR racers. We are caught up in our own kind of race, which demands an increasing amount of speed, focus on the future, and rapid results. To keep up, we press ahead; we forgo rest stops, and do not examine what we've left behind.

We also miss the message that we are found, because we are part of a throw-away culture. Baby Boomers, in particular, grew up with disposable everything. Nothing was expected to last or to be handed on. Everything could and should be replaced. Everything was losable. In fact, everything should be lost and replaced rather than found.

A further reason that we miss the message that we are found is that the art of listening has become passé in our culture. We may not be great listeners to God, or to each other, because we may not have always been listened to when we were in need of a listening ear.

Recently I read a book by Mary Karr titled *Lit: A Memoir*. Karr is also the author of *The Liars' Club* and *Cherry*. All three of her books have been on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

In *Lit*, Karr describes her hardscrabble upbringing in a small town in Texas, where she was raised by alcoholic parents and a narcissistic mother. She made various attempts to pull herself out of poverty and carve out a career for herself as a writer and English professor, while raising a son and trying to keep her marriage from unraveling, as she struggled with severe depression and an addiction to alcohol.

Karr explains that over the course of several months she was encouraged by her 12-step sponsor to start saying her prayers. Karr goes on to explain that she didn't believe in God, and thought that prayer was essentially a bunch of mumbo-jumbo. She also described several setbacks before she was able to maintain sobriety for more than a few weeks. Finally, and largely in desperation, Karr begrudgingly began to pray in a fake-it-'till-you-make-it sort of way, and in the end, she was surprised that the practice of prayer actually helped her get and stay sober.

If you are struggling with your relationship with God, or question the power of prayer, I commend Karr's prayer approach to you—fake-it-'till-you-make-it.

At first for Mary Karr, the practice of prayer was about her talking to God while doubting that God existed and doubting that if God existed that God was listening to her. Eventually, over time, as Karr matured spiritually, she was able to listen and allow herself to hear the message that God was offering her all along—that she was been found, and that she had never actually been out of the realm of God's care and concern.

Part of what got Karr to the place and posture where she could hear these healing truths about her life had to do with the guidance of her 12-step sponsor, and nurturing her inner ear—her ability to hear that still, small voice of God—first through the guise of someone who, as she put it, “was wearing human skin.”

The healing process, then, for Karr was integrally associated with the listening role that numerous recovering addicts demonstrated for her, by taking her phone calls, meeting her for tea, and showing up at the park to listen while she poured out her heart and her son played on the playground. Through these gentle acts of kindness, Mary Karr discovered that she was found. She got sober and stayed sober. And she became a nationally acclaimed writer.

IV

I have seen God show up in human skin for others and help them know—even when they felt lost—that they were found. Perhaps you have too.

I am reminded, for example, of a young woman who was active in a church that I served years ago. She had a lot going for her. She was intelligent and attractive, and came from a supportive, successful family from the South. She graduated with honors from one of the Seven Sisters, and had come to our church during a particularly rough patch in her life when she was transitioning from an inpatient psychiatric hospital to independent living in the community.

This young woman came to my church, and began connecting with some of the members and got involved in a few of the programs. One day she made an appointment to see me, and told me, among other things, that she wanted to join the church. I explained the steps for membership, and said that we would be happy to welcome her. As usual, I asked what had influenced her decision to join.

She said, “I want to join this church because the people here are the only people who I don’t have to pay to listen to me.”

I don’t think we have to be alumni/ae of psychiatric hospitals or addicted to drugs or alcohol to know that deep listening is a rare commodity in our time. Anyone who’s gone through their own rough patch, and found a friend who would help them find their voice, sort out their thoughts, or formulate a plan for healthier living knows the power and importance of listening, of helping another know that they are found even when they feel lost.

V

I have seen God show up in human skin for others. I have seen God show up in people who have helped others know—even when they have felt lost—that they are found. I hope you have too.

But if you have not, then I hope that Eden Church may be that place for you—a place where you can feel heard, where you can trust that your life matters to God and to us, a place where you can slow down and step out of the rat race for a few moments, and a place and a people where you may discover that you are found—found by God.

I hope that we can be that place for you, and I hope that you will join us in trying to be that place and that community for others, so that together we may share God’s joy in finding and being found, like the shepherd who recovered his lost sheep and the housekeeper who found her last coin. Amen.