

“Being Found”

I'll begin my sermon this morning with a question. Have you ever been lost? Minister Steven Clark Goad tells about the day that his mother got lost in Danner's Dime Store in Indianapolis, Indiana. Steven says that he knew exactly where HE was – in the toy section, having a ball with a new game that he discovered. But all of the sudden he heard his mother crying desperately, “Stevie, Stevie, where are you?” He said, “I knew in a minute that my mother was lost and so I ran to find her.”

I was lying in bed one morning, waiting on my husband to get out of the shower so I could have my turn, and I started thinking about being lost. There are many ways to be lost. Some of us have been lost physically – either by taking a wrong turn or refusing to ask for directions or by staying too long on the toy aisle in the dime store. Some of us have been emotionally lost – not being able to make a decision or pitying ourselves because we can't understand why things have happened the way that they did. And I suppose if the truth be told, many of us have been spiritually lost too. We have been like Stevie's mom in the dime store but what we are yelling instead is, “God, God, where are you?”

All of my thinking about being lost led me to consider the 15th chapter of Luke, a trilogy of stories often referred to as “The Parables of the Lost Things”. And as I did, I couldn't help but think about Wiley Hogue, a retired minister living at the Presbyterian Home when I first started working there. Wiley was always very ill and so I spent a lot of time with him in various hospital rooms, listening to him reminisce. I believe his

favorite passage in all of Scripture must have Luke 15 because he loved to talk about it and I would listen as if we had never discussed it until, ultimately he would ask the question that I knew he would. “Have you ever wondered HOW that sheep got lost?” And before I could say a word, he would answer his own question.

“He just nibbled his way right out of that pasture. First it was just a nibble – just one little lie, just one quarter at the slots, just one drink, just one cigarette – and before he knew it, he was gone – right out of that field!” And when you think about it this way, who among us has not been close to the edge of the pasture, about to nibble our way into lostness?

Perhaps that is why David included in the Psalm that we said earlier this line, “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.” As a shepherd, David knew that every one of us would one day have at least the POTENTIAL to be lost. We will all be surrounded with the enemies – the things that keep us from being close to God and from walking in His will. So I will ask you another question. What are your enemies?

You see, if we view the enemy as one that keeps us from God, we have a wide variety of choices. An enemy can be a person – someone who offers us a drink or takes us to the casino or suggests the lie. Or an enemy can be a situation – a job that we value more than our relationships or a sickness that causes us to question our faith. And the enemy can even be something within us – our pride, our ambition, our stubbornness.

Now before I start sounding too self-righteous, let me say that many of these things are not enemies unless we make them so. I do not believe there is anything wrong with a couple of drinks or ONE quarter in the slot machine. Certainly ambition and even

stubbornness can help us go far in life. But when these things become our focus, become things that we value more than the love of God, THEN they have become our enemies.

David assures us that even in the midst of such adversity, God is there. He is present and caring for us – to the point of preparing our meal while the enemy surrounds us. This means that everything that we need to turn away from the enemy is available for us. All we have to do is take advantage of God's grace.

In his book [A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23](#), Philip Keller, a modern day shepherd, tells of his experience of preparing the table where the sheep will eat. On the first ranch that he owned, there was a flower that grew known as the camma. Now blue cammas are a delight in spring and bloom voraciously for everyone to see. But the field also contained white cammas, a much less visible flower but there just the same. The problem is that while the blue camma is completely harmless, the white camma is a deadly menace to sheep. Just a nibble of a one of the lily-like leaves can bring on paralyzation and ultimately death.

So to prepare the table, the place where the sheep will feed, the shepherd must go ahead and find all of the white cammas and dig them up before the sheep come through. Can you imagine caring for an animal so much? Well, God loves you and me so much and His care for us is so absolute, that He is willing to take this step for us and prepare our table in the presence of our enemies. He wants us to be completely safe, away from ALL of our adversaries and free to live in obedience to Him. But he also loves us enough to allow us the freedom to wander, perhaps into a field that has not been picked so clean. And there, we, like the sheep, encounter our enemies.

So assuming that we ALL will be tempted by the enemy at sometime or another – that all of us find flowers that appear beautiful but are actually deadly, then another important question to ask is this: Have you ever been found?

When I was a child growing up in the sixties, we didn't have video games and DVD players and cell phones to occupy our time. So, we spent our evenings after supper out in the yard with one another for hours of kick the can and baseball and hide-and-go-seek. The last game was my favorite. I was usually the only girl in the crowd and loved to show up all those boys by hiding in a place that they could never find me.

Our yard had a big chinaberry tree and I had become quite an expert at climbing it. So one day, I got the idea that hardly anyone looks up when they are searching for someone who is hiding and decided to scale that tree. I had a wonderful time, trying to conceal my laughter as all those silly BOYS were discovered but could never find me. One by one, they all walked underneath me as I watched them, looking behind bushes and under steps and in trash cans but NEVER looking up. This was great fun!

Until I heard the voice of one of the mothers yell – “Kenny – ten more minutes and then it's time to come in!” And all of the sudden, I began to worry – what if no one found me and they all went in. Then I would be stuck in the tree forever, waiting on someone to find me. I would be lost and never found! And to an eight year old, this is a terrible prospect. So the next time that pack of boys ran beneath me, I conveniently shook the branch I was on until a few chinaberries fell down and those dumb boys looked up and then, “HOTDOG AND HALLALUJAH! I WAS FOUND”. And I rejoiced!

Now, in Luke's story, the dilemma of being lost and found is told in response to a complaint that the Pharisees had about Jesus eating with sinners. Of course, they are

simply trying to point out once again Jesus' completely radical habit of hanging out with those THEY deemed undesirable. But Jesus turns their complaint into a teaching moment about joy.

I will tell you that not so long ago, I found myself, quite without planning it standing right on the edge of the pasture. You see, before I knew what had happened in my life I had nibbled my way almost completely out of God's meadow. Now, as curious as you may be, I believe that the details of my wandering are not really important and by NOT sharing them, I am freeing you up to put the details of your OWN life into my story.

But I WILL tell the END of my story. Just before I was completely lost, Jesus, the great shepherd, took his shepherd's crook and gently drew me to his breast and whispered quietly but firmly, "YOU ARE MINE AND I WILL NOT LET YOU GO." And the joy that I felt on that day completely overshadowed any joy that I have ever experienced. And friends, I have been overwhelmed with the understanding of how great God's love really is. Because what I know for certain is this – even though the world is filled with warfare and abuse and homelessness and many terrible circumstances that must fill God's mind and trouble His heart, He still cares enough for ME – with all that is going on, to rescue me from lostness. And He cares just as much for you too.

Minister Tom Are, Jr. defines grace as "the faithfulness of God to hold on to us, even when we break God's heart." Then he goes on to say, "With one hand, He holds together the pieces of His own heart and with the other, God reaches out to hold onto us."

This is the grace that I have experienced and when I did, I knew that for the first time in my life, I really understood Luke 15, not just in my mind but in my heart and

soul. Because the point that Jesus is making in this parable is that the joy that I felt in being found is infinitely small compared to the joy that God felt when he found me!

In Biblical times, it was quite common for a flock to belong to an entire village and therefore to have two or three shepherds. And if one sheep was lost, the other shepherds arrived back in the village on time with the ninety-nine while one shepherd was searching for the wayward sheep. Legend tells us that the whole village would stand in watch and if they saw a shepherd returning on the horizon with the sheep over his shoulders, the whole village would rejoice – giving a shout of thanksgiving. This is the joy that I felt when I understood that God had reached out to me so powerfully. And this is the joy that God feels when one lost sinner is found.

I believe that I am not unique and that all of us are lost, in some way, at some time, nibbling our way almost out of the pasture. But the Good News of the Gospel for us today is that God never gives up His searching. God risks his own heart for his wayward creatures. In fact, He risked his heart so much that he sent His only Son to die so that we could count ourselves among the found. By this we know that the search comes not because OUR hearts are repentant or holy or righteous, but because deep within GOD'S heart is a hunger for us, a longing that will not let us go. And by this we can live in hope and the knowledge of the promise that we will be found. Let us all rejoice. Amen.