

Losing and being lost (Luke 15:1-10)

It's complicated to lose things.

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September 13, 2019

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When I pulled into the church parking lot I noticed the mom, dad, and 13-year-old daughter of the family next door walking slowly in the middle of the street.

They paused to peek into side yards and bent down to look under bushes. Two people I presumed were neighbors joined them in scanning the neighborhood.

I assumed their dog Cane, the 30-pound bundle of tightly wound energy that is my dog's occasional playmate, had burst through their invisible fence to chase a rabbit or squirrel. I started across the street to offer my help in finding the wayward pet—and then stopped when the dad rang the doorbell of a nearby home. He went inside and soon came out with their 8-year-old daughter in tow.

"She was in there?!?" the mom yelled. "Your sister was so worried about you!" It wasn't just the other daughter who was afraid. I could hear the residual terror in the mom's voice. The last ten minutes had been a living nightmare. "Don't you ever do that again!" She stuck her finger in her daughter's face.

This wasn't the simple joy that is described in the stories of the lost sheep and missing coin. It's complicated to lose things. When I lose something—my keys, my credit card, a favorite pair of earrings—I am full of self-recrimination and regret. *I should have been more careful*, I tell myself. *If I were more organized, not as lazy, and basically a better person, this wouldn't have happened.* I'm usually right (at least about being more organized and less lazy). If I always put things back where

they belong they wouldn't get lost.

I've noticed a pattern in the churches I serve. Someone will go missing from the church, long enough for folks to start to ask me about them. I encourage them to reach out, to make a phone call, to send a note, to let the person who's been absent know that they are missed. The wanderer shows up for a Sunday service or special event, perhaps making a last-ditch effort to connect. If they don't make a special effort to reach out to others there, they are ignored. They were missed, but not welcomed back.

Do the returnee's church friends feel guilty that they went missing in the first place? Do the friends wonder if there was something that they did wrong? Are they embarrassed they didn't reach out sooner?

I remember being taught by some church growth guru that it's not good strategy to go after people who have left your church. Better to seek out new people. Maybe that's true. But it's not what the shepherd and the woman do. They keep looking. The shepherd doesn't make excuses about having turned his back for just a second; he just searches in every valley and on every hill for the missing sheep. The woman doesn't yell at herself about being more careful; she just sweeps under the table and shakes out the blankets until she finds the coin.

Jesus is comparing himself to the shepherd and the woman. Instead of grumbling about the people he hangs out with, he suggests, the Pharisees should come to the party to celebrate their return. When I put myself in the same role that Jesus does, that of searching shepherd and seeking woman, I feel bad that I lost something in the first place. I get unstuck when I remember that I am also the lost sheep and the misplaced coin. I have been sought and found.