

Salvation & Judgment – Part 11

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Luke 15:1-6

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see.” It is amazing to me how many people love “Amazing Grace.” People who never darken the door of a church, can sing this hymn. When I meet with unchurched folks to talk about a memorial service, they will often request that we sing “Amazing Grace.” Who knows, maybe we can thank Judy Collins and her widely listened to recording for that.

But there are times when I wonder are people really listening to the words? “Saved a wretch like me...” Do you really consider yourself to be a wretch? There was that time I made an ill-advised hospital call the night of my anniversary, but I don’t often look in the mirror and think, “what a wretch!” Actually, I know of churches where instead of singing “wretch” like me, they sing “soul” like me or “child” like me, but I’m not sure the author, John Newton, who came to write this hymn from the midst of what he thought was a pretty wretched life, and who felt delivered from that life, would approve of changing the words.

And then there is, “I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see.” What does it mean to be lost? Any of you feel lost? When Jesus announced to Zacchaeus that he had come to “seek and save the lost,” it’s not hard to imagine Zacchaeus saying, “Did you say, ‘lost’? Yes, I’ll admit that I have made some mistakes, maybe cheated a few people, sometimes got a bit carried away in my service to the Romans, but lost? Don’t you think that’s overstating things just a bit, Jesus? Look at the balance in my checkbook, look around at this beautiful house. Does this all look like ‘lost’ to you?”

A couple of weeks ago when I preached on salvation, I discovered that there was more to this topic than could be fit into one sermon. And so today, I give you...Salvation – Part II. And I want to focus on Jesus’ words about seeking and saving and finding the lost. Can such words possibly have anything to say to us? Again, do you ever feel lost and in need of being found?

Fred Craddock shares a story about a time he attended a large conference for preachers: “After the last session there was a large reception to which all were invited, and all were there.(those preachers never miss an opportunity to score some free food) I had missed lunch, so I pushed my way quickly to one of the serving tables. And it was there that I met him. We exchanged names, but I was not able to shake hands as I had a cup of punch in one hand and a little plate of goodies in the other. But he couldn’t shake hands with me either as he was occupied with a large camera. I said, ‘Well, you’re going to do some serious picture taking.’

“ ‘It had better be serious,’ he said. ‘I’m here to cover this event for the local paper.’

“I said, ‘You’re the religion editor?’

“ ‘No, no, she’s sick and I was asked to fill in at the last minute. I’ve never been to an event like this before.’

“ ‘I said, ‘Well, what did you think of the lecture tonight?’

“ ‘ Oh, I didn’t hear it.’

“ ‘I’m sorry you weren’t there. It was exceptional.’

“Oh, I was there. I just didn’t hear it.’

“I was trying to understand how somebody could be present and not hear it. I asked, ‘Why?’

“He said, ‘I guess I was preoccupied. I’ll need some help in reporting on what was said.’

“ ‘You’re in luck,’ I said. ‘The speaker is still here and I’m sure she would be glad to give you an interview.’

“ ‘Maybe later, but right now I’d like to talk with you.’

“I said, ‘About what? If it’s about the speech, I really think you need to talk to the speaker.’

“ ‘It’s not about the speech. It’s about me. I was told you might be able to give me a few minutes.’

Says Craddock, “I saw in his face, not the curiosity of a reporter, but the distress of a troubled spirit. We moved aside to a corner to get as much privacy as an occasion like that will provide. He said, ‘I don’t know where to start. I’m discontented. I think in the church you would say that I don’t have piece of mind.’

“I said, ‘You’re discontented with what...your work?’

“ ‘No, I love my work. I’ve always wanted to be in the newspaper business.’

“ ‘So you love your work, but you want something more, is that it?’

“ ‘No, well everybody wants more, but it’s not more that I want, it’s different...I want different.’

“ ‘Sounds like you are bored.’

“ ‘No, no, I’m not bored. I wish I were bored. If I were bored, something inside of me would be dead or asleep and that would be better than this.’

“ ‘What do you mean...than this?’

“He said, ‘I feel like I’ve been running the bases but didn’t hit a home run. Do you ever notice kids in a small town, cruising Main Street back and forth, round and round. They burn a tank of gas and then go home. That’s kind of the way it is for me.’

“I asked, ‘Do you have any friends that feel this way?’

“Well, no, I don’t know. We don’t talk about it. They seem to be satisfied but I’m not sure they are. They talk too loud, they laugh too soon, they compliment too quickly, join all the clubs too readily. No, I don’t think so.”

Does anybody here this morning know what that man was talking about? Do you understand what he was feeling? Any of you ever feel that way...like you are touching all the right bases but not hitting a home run, just burning gas going back and forth on Main Street but not really getting anywhere? I think of the story of the retired greyhound who, when asked why he quit racing, said, “I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit. All that running, running and running, and what I was chasing was not even real.” (I’m the preacher. I can have a story about a talking dog if I want!) Again, ever feel that way? “I once was lost...” For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” There can be so many different ways to be lost, in exile, far from home. Could Jesus be talking about us?

Some words from that noted theologian, Bob Dylan come to mind:

How does it feel?
How does it feel?
To be on your own,
With no direction home,
Like a rolling stone.

I’ve always liked these words of Barbara Brown Taylor: “On any given night, however comfortable we may be and however secure our future may seem, we remain vulnerable to a certain heaviness of heart than can come upon us for no apparent reason at all. It may begin as a flutter in the chest or a full-blown ache – a sudden hollowness inside, a peculiar melancholy, an inexplicable homesickness. Have you felt it? The sense that there is a place you belong that you have somehow gotten separated from, a place that misses you as much as you miss it and that is calling you to return, only you do not know where or how to get there. All you know is that you are not there yet, and that your life will not be complete until you are.”

I once read about a Sunday morning at a church when the minister didn’t show up. Announcements were made, people stood and sang the opening hymn, then sat down and wondered, now what? Just then, a side window opened, and the minister crawled in through that window, robe and all. Then he went up front and proceeded to lead the service as if nothing had happened. Later, when asked why he did such a thing, he said, “Well, everybody just sits out there so bored. I thought I’d give them a little something extra!” I suppose that it one way to address our sense of being lost and far from home, but I’m not sure that is what Jesus is talking about.

Of course, on every corner of town there are people giving us advice on how to find peace of mind and happiness and fulfillment. There is always another set of self-help cd’s to buy and listen to. I should know...I certainly have bought enough of them over the years. But then I recall some familiar words: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep, and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it. When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.”

I don’t know in what ways you may be feeling lost. I don’t know if you feel lost at all...this sermon may make no sense to you whatsoever. And yet, I talk with so many people who do feel trapped by all the old patterns of fear and self-seeking, self-doubt, self-torment, old habits of indifference or even self-destruction, people who on the surface seem to be doing just fine, but in their heart of hearts feel far from home and clueless as to how to get back there, who can stand right where they are and still feel the ground shifting under their feet.

And then a word is spoken, a word about seeking and saving the lost, a word about a shepherd who will not tolerate even a one percent loss and who rejoices over each one that is found. And the words suggest that we who strive so hard perhaps need to step back and let ourselves be found; that we who are always out there seeking are also being sought. Says Craddock, “When our parents, Adam and Eve, left the Garden of Eden, God whispered into their ear, saying “I will come for you.” They didn’t understand that as a promise; they thought it was a threat and so they ran. And they’ve been running ever since, hiding in the midst of tears, hiding under running laughter, hiding in shopping sprees, hiding in travel, hiding in the upward spiral of strength and power, hiding in bad relationships, sometimes even hiding in church, hiding in groups that are searching for God. Maybe you need to let God find you.” “When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.”

In the words of T.S. Eliot: “We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started...and know the place for the first time.” Because, finally, true life comes not in knowing but in being known; not in seeking but in being sought; not in finding, but being found. And the One we are looking for, the one we are looking for, is right here and has been here all along. He comes to us. He finds us where we are, and then that place – whatever or wherever it happens to be – begins to feel like home.