

# The Lost and Found Department

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## Luke 15: 1-10

I suspect you are all familiar with the phrase, “an act of God.” In legal parlance, it is an unforeseeable or inevitable occurrence, such as a tornado, caused by nature and not by human beings. I don’t know why an act of God always has to be so destructive – why don’t we talk about births or falling in love as acts of God - but that’s the way it is in the world of law and insurance. But there was an incident a while back in which this familiar phrase took on a somewhat cloudier meaning.

Highway 101, north of Los Angeles, was blocked at Seacliff, north of Ventura, when a Southern Pacific freight train derailed, dumping seventy-six drums of aqueous hydrazine, a suspected carcinogen. Eight drums broke, their dangerous fumes driving more than 300 people from their homes, and forcing thousands of not exactly patient motorists to take a thirty-five mile detour through windy mountain roads. Don’t want to even think about that traffic jam.

The cause of the derailment was not in dispute, but the cause of the cause was. It was agreed that a bearing had overheated, causing an axle to snap off a car. A Federal Railroad Administration official called the overheating, “a freak thing, one of those acts of God.” She insisted, “It’s like something we call ‘summer kinks,’ when a track heats up and melts and causes an accident. It’s just an act of God.”

But a state safety official disagreed. “It could be a bearing, but then again, it could be a faulty axle,” he said. “It’s premature to call this an act of God. I haven’t heard anything from my staff that answers the question of what exactly caused this accident.”

Understand that these people standing around arguing whether or not God was to blame were not theologians. They were railroad people. For them, the phrase, “an act of God” seemed to be anything from, “I haven’t got a clue,” to “Don’t look at me.” This was some serious copping out. God, for them, seemed to be the unexplainable and often destructive darkness just beyond our little patch of light. When all other explanations fail, especially if it is bad, call it an act of God.

Jesus, however, would seem to have another idea. Let’s think for a moment about the context of these familiar parables. He is in trouble again. What has he done this time to so upset the religious establishment? “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” I recall a newspaper article about the pubs in Oxford, England. I don’t spend a lot of time reading about pubs, but this one was rather interesting. It said, “A good pub is a ready-made party, a home away from home, a club anyone can join.” I don’t want to offend anyone’s religious sensibilities, but it is not hard for me to imagine the Jesus of Luke 15 in such a place, eating and drinking with anyone, welcoming anyone who happened to show up...even tax collectors and sinners. (I must confess that since quarterly taxes are due tomorrow, I’m not too sure about the whole tax collector thing. Even them...?)

All welcome at his table. He receives them, he invites them in. And those who enforce standards for proper conduct, who know who should eat where, who know who is welcome and who is not welcome, grumble. In response to this grumbling, Jesus tells these stories. My mind goes back to the “acts of God” discussion. According to Jesus, one of the most significant and ongoing acts of God is the seeking, finding, welcoming and saving of those who are lost. But who are the lost? And who are the shepherds...who is that woman, searching and searching, and rejoicing when she finds that which was lost?

A Fred Craddock story: “During the gathering dark of summer evenings, we kids played in a great yard amid circling woods. We played hide and seek. There was always one kid who spoiled the whole game by being too good at hiding himself. Every kid ought to know that in hide and seek you want to hide well, but not too well. Eventually, you must be found. But this kid was great at hiding. He would go way out beyond the yard into the dark woods. Or he would slither down into the basement where nobody would go to look for him. Do you know somebody who, even though not a kid, is really good at hiding?”

“Well, anyway, one by one people would be found. “Why, shucks, you found me,” each would say. But this one kid would never be found. And so we would give up and go on to another game. He would eventually come back furious. “The purpose of the game is hide and seek,” he would lecture us, “Not hide and give up.”

Craddock concludes, “But there are some people who are so good at hiding, so good at camouflaging themselves, so good at tucking themselves away where nobody would ever dare look. Do you know somebody like that, somebody waiting to be found?” Could that person be me?

I don’t know what crosses your mind when you first hear this parable. One possible response is that if God, the shepherd, favors the lost, cares for the one even at the expense of the ninety-nine, where does that leave me? I try to follow the rules, do what is right, live a good and faithful life...am I somehow being excluded in this teaching of Jesus? As he gathers at his table the lost, the lonely,

and the forsaken, is there still a place for me? Not hard to imagine the Pharisees thinking that. They were God-fearing men, who wanted to do right, uphold the law, live their lives according to God's will. What were they supposed to do with this guy who received and welcomed sinners even as he admonished the righteous? I have heard this question, this critique, from faithful church folks over the years. Is Jesus excluding me because I follow the rules?

But that is why I like Craddock's story. For he seems to say that no matter who we are, saint or sinner, at some level of our being we are wandering and alone, far from home; that deep down there is a part of each and every one of us that is lost and wanting to be found.

I once read a story told by an old rancher explaining why cows so often end up lost and wandering on open roads: "A cow is nibbling on a tuft of grass in the middle of a field, moving from one tuft to the next. Before you know it, she ends up at some grass next to the fence. Noticing a nice tuft of green on the other side of the fence, the cow stumbles through an old tear in the fence and finds herself outside and eventually in the middle of a road. "Cows don't intend to get lost," the rancher explained, "they just nibble their way to lostness."

Maybe not a bad description of a lot of us...we don't intend to get lost, we just gradually nibble our way... There's the daily routine, anxieties, fears, poor decisions, guilt over things done or left undone, regrets, apathy, the gnawing sense that perhaps we were meant for more than this. It all adds up, a tuft here, a tuft there, until we wake up one day to discover that we have nibbled our way to lostness. We can feel so far from home, with no idea how to get back. But just when we are starting to despair, just when we are so filled with regret and guilt that we are unable to undo our mistakes, just when we feel reconciliation is no longer possible and we can never retrace our steps and make things right, Jesus tells us a story about a God who is one step ahead, a God who is not only gracious, but also resourceful – think of the woman finding that coin – a God who not only loves but also seeks, searches, finds and saves the beloved – the lost. With this God, home is always waiting, love's door is always open, and it's all so very near.

But there is one more point to be made here; one more possibility emerging from this text. Jesus asks, "Which of you, having a hundred sheep...Which of you...?" In other words, don't just listen to this story from the sheep's perspective. Imagine yourself the shepherd, leaving his flock to find the one lost in the wilderness; imagine yourself, not the lost coin, but the woman seeking desperately to find it. The parable begins to take on a different sound. It is no longer just about us being found and loved in spite of our weakness and shortcomings – our lostness. Instead it becomes a story of seeking, sweeping, finding, and rejoicing. As one pastor writes, "The invitation is not about being rescued by Jesus over and over again, but about joining him in rounding up God's herd and recovering God's treasure. It is about questioning the idea that there are certain conditions the lost must meet before they are eligible to be found, or that there are certain qualities they must exhibit before we will seek them out. It is about trading in our high standards on a strong flashlight and or a good broom. It is about discovering the joy of finding." Yet another of the acts of God.

It's crazy, really. Not at all practical. When Jesus asks, "Which of you...?" the answer is easy: None of us! No rational person would act that way...leave the ninety-nine to find the one. It's preposterous to think of a shepherd taking such a risk. There is no choice but to sacrifice the one to save the many. But wait, this isn't a story about how we act. It's a story about how God acts, the lengths to which God will go to bring home the lonely and lost. And as outrageous as it is, there is an invitation here – an invitation to join in – to join in the searching and especially to join in the rejoicing.

I think of the words of the Joan Osborne song: "What if God was one of us...trying to make his way home." And of course, that is precisely what we see and proclaim in the life and teaching of Jesus - God becoming one of us, sharing our humanity, sharing our lostness? Yes, Jesus understands the struggle with being lost. So he does not turn away, but instead turns toward the lost, taking great risks to make a place for them, to welcome them home.

A rabbi sounded much like a Protestant when he said, "In any community, if there are two Jews there are three synagogues: the one I go to, the one you go to, and the one neither of us would be caught dead in." That is so much the story of the church, these days. Sadly, it also seems to be the story of Congress. So much exclusion, so much judgment, so many lines in the sand. But Jesus goes another direction. He asks, "Which of you..." Then he goes and as he goes he looks back over his shoulder to see if we are following him - all of our communities opening doors of welcome and rejoicing. Note the element of joy in his stories. Sinners and tax collectors Pharisees and church members, all gathered at the table with Christ. Rejoice! Laugh! Be glad! They, like us, have returned home and we all now sit in the presence of God. Take another look at that shepherd coming home, laughing and singing, with the lost sheep over his shoulder. When one in our community goes missing, we are all affected. When one is restored, we are all better off for it. All are included; none are lost. Let the party begin. We can feast. Hope is restored. That's how it is in the household of God!