



From the Pulpit: May 14, 2023

Sixth Sunday of Eastertide, Confirmation, Mother's Day

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Luke 15:25–32

The Valley of Lost Things, IV: The Party I Refused to Attend

Parables are a gift, given to us before we were born. Parables are precious, like gold. Parables are sometimes hard to open, hard to walk into, hard to unpack. Parables are like glasses and help us see what is already in front of us. Parables tap into our memories, values, and deepest longings. Parables resurrect what is very old, very wise, and sometimes very unsettling. Parables teach us to recognize what we've already always known.¹

You know the parable of the prodigal son. But do you know the story of his brother? The prodigal son takes his share of the inheritance and squanders it. Spends it all until it's gone. When a famine hits, he is far from home and now without money. He takes up a job, but it is still not enough to eke by. He decides to return home, humbled by his experience, and labor for his father. While he is still driving up the driveway, his father runs out to greet him... and after the kind of bear hug that only a father can give, dad throws a lavish party.

"Meanwhile," Jesus explains, "the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' The older brother became angry and refused to go in.

"This story is about a failure of recognition. A failure of attention."

So his father went out and pleaded with him. But the older son answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."

A lost coin, found. A lost sheep, found. A lost son, found. After each lost thing found, a party. Luke chapter fifteen is simple enough, but it might hold everything we need to know about God. When we are lost, God goes after us. When we are lost, God seeks us until we are found. But here's today's question: will the older brother go to the party? Can he bear to celebrate? Jesus spins these fabulous little tales and we're still thinking of them two thousand years later. We see ourselves in the younger brother. We see ourselves in the older brother. We even see ourselves in the father, watching his sons hurt and be hurt by each other and the world. We know this story is telling us something about ourselves. We intuitively know that we fit within this story. And two thousand years later, this story is still about us, getting lost, and God running out to greet us.

¹From Jerome Berryman, "Godly Play" and Amy-Jill Levine, "What the Prodigal Son Story Doesn't Mean"

Google “how to find lost things” and you get this list.

About 1,160,000,000 results (0.49 seconds)

How to Find Lost Things

1. Double-Check Where it Should Be...
2. Check Where You've Lost it Before...
3. Retrace Your Steps...
4. Check Where You Last Used The Item...
5. Explore All Seating Areas...
6. Cut the Noise...
7. Change Lighting...
8. Clean the House...

It seems obvious enough: double check where the item should be... check where you've lost it before... retrace your steps. In Jesus' little parable, you can almost hear the father's footsteps as he retraces where he's gone wrong, how his son has become lost. He double checks. He relives every conversation. He wonders why. He watches the window for the son's return.

But at the same time, just under his nose, the older son was getting lost, right before his eyes. This second part of the story is not about your lost wallet, your lost cell phone, your lost bicycle, your lost umbrella. It is not about losing something. It's also not like getting lost in a book. Getting lost in thought. Getting lost in the deep abyss that is the internet, scrolling when you might otherwise be connecting with the person sitting next to you.

This isn't even about the time as a kid you got lost at the mall. This isn't the kind of losing that happens when you go to visit your mother this month in the lost place of dementia and she is barely able to find your name when you pull up a chair. “Alzheimer is a thief” my friend quips, thinking of the long losing.

The older son is getting lost in a different way. Lost in the most obvious place. I guess it's closer to the time you called your husband to tell him you couldn't find your cellphone, only to realize that you just called him using your cell phone. Or the time you couldn't find your glasses because they were right there on your face the whole time.

This story is about a failure of recognition.

A failure of attention.

It's easy enough. Failing to pay attention. I know someone who lost their spouse to divorce years before either of them even thought about signing any paperwork: they just stopped paying attention to one another. No fight. No affair. Just the slow unraveling. One day at a time. A failure to look up and see. A failure to notice.

“Getting lost in plain sight is easier than you'd expect.”

Friendships disintegrate in a similar fashion: your most treasured confidant slowly over months and years becomes a total stranger to you, and you can hardly reconcile your memories of that friendship with the reality that is right in front of you today.

We can get lost sitting next to one another. We can leave without leaving. We can walk away without walking away.

Getting lost in plain sight is easier than you'd expect.

One of our own confidants from about a decade ago describes her battle with bulimia that way: hidden in plain sight. She got good at it. Pretending all was well. Eating dinner with her mother. Pretending food was friend not foe. Now that she is in recovery, a lifelong recovery, she writes about her struggle publicly as a cathartic way of helping you realize that you have within you the courage to let your loved one know that you are hiding something so very hard to bear. Tell someone, she'd advise. As hard as it is. Do not carry the burden alone.²

It seems hard enough to get lost in plain sight, but it happens.

²Emma Noyes, Bulimia Doesn't Look the Way You Think It Does <https://medium.com/invisible-illness/bulimia-doesnt-look-the-way-you-think-it-does-6611799f8ea5>

Backpacker Magazine interviewed a pair of wilderness hikers who lost their way just meters from their own campsite in the Alaskan Tundra. Taking just their binoculars, they went to scan the horizon after setting up camp. Just get a sense of things. One of the hikers set down his binoculars in the grass and then lost track of them. He asked his friend to help him find his binoculars. Both hikers had their heads looking down looking for the binoculars when a fog set in. When they looked up they couldn't see their campsite anymore. It had just been a few meters away. Instead of waiting out the fog, they walked around more trying to find their tent. The more they walked, the more determined they were. In reality the more they walked, the more lost they became. Minutes became hours. Night fell. Evening became morning. Sunrise didn't get them any closer to their campsite. Five horrible days later they come across a huge river and recognize it as the place where their hike began. Across the river, hikers are beginning their week of hiking.

The lost hikers' wave, but everyone just thinks it's a friendly hello. A welcome to the wilderness. No one understands they are in distress. They are lost in plain sight. A pilot, even, in a small plane, flies over them and waves from the cockpit. They couldn't get anyone to notice them, to help them, to even think they'd need help.

Finally when they are rescued, they realize no one ever even thought to worry about them: they told their family they'd be gone five days and that's how long they were gone; five days and 28 pounds lighter after not eating all week.

The rescue team that finally brought them to safety went back for their gear and it was exactly where they left it, quite nearby, embarrassingly nearby food, water, shelter, and a GPS system all still there just around the corner from where they were rescued.³

So, it's easier than we'd like to get lost in plain sight.

But the God we affirm today is a God who comes searching for us even still. Even here. Right here in this Sanctuary. You'd think this Sanctuary would be filled with people who easily notice God in the world on a daily basis. But sometimes it's in the most obvious of places that the most lost people sit. Even in a so-called God-drenched place like this, where you might expect God to be so very easily found, we need the God of this parable to come searching for us again and again.

So close to home, we too can get lost. So close to God, we too can stop paying attention. So close to home, we can lose our way. We can look up to see a fog has set in. A fog of grief. A fog of stress. A fog of loneliness. A fog of inattention. And we can't make our way back. Some days we even speak our distress aloud and those closest to us think it's just a friendly wave from

across the river. So it is that we come to trust the God who comes searching for us. So it is that we trust that God comes looking for us. God invites us again to see this whole beautiful endeavor called life that is right here before our eyes. It's been ours all along. To delight in. To treasure. To notice. To love. But sometimes we get lost. And so we trust in the God who seeks us out.

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³Lost in Plain Sight, by Louisa Albanese and Zoe Gates, Backpacker Magazine December 14, 2022 <https://www.backpacker.com/survival/out-alive-podcast/lost-in-plain-sight/>

—The Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Gracious and Loving God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: Fall fast across our assembly this morning as Living, Life-Giving Spirit.

Come to each of us even as you have come to these 38 young people who have committed themselves this morning to a lifetime of discipleship. We give you thanks that in their young lives there has never been a day when your Spirit has not been working, sometimes quietly and invisibly, other times more profoundly, but always guiding and prodding them to that higher, nobler life they have discovered in Jesus.

We give you thanks that your Spirit has led them to confirm a promise made for them, in some cases, 14 years ago, before they had thought to understand or speech to make sense of it.

We give you thanks for loving homes where mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers took care to school them not just in language and math and history and art and music, but in the sacred story of your walk with your people from the first day until now; for homes in which prayer frames the daily hours; in which divine worship punctuates the weekly rhythms; in which stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Moses and David, of Peter, James, and John, of Luther, Bonhoeffer, and King informed their conscience and guided their decisions; in which the daily example of quiet, winsome rectitude taught them almost unconsciously what a beautiful human life ought to look like.

And now, Lord, we dare to pray that your Spirit will continue to accompany them into the uncertain future. Help them to study hard and learn much in their school days and to work faithfully to Christ-like purpose in their professional lives, and to love relentlessly without thought of return in their families and friendships and collegialities.

We thank you for the long life and beautiful witness of our friend Christie Savage. Receive her into the arms of your mercy, and into the blessed rest of everlasting peace.

Ever-Giving God, there are too many beautiful things for which to give thanks today. Your goodness exhausts our speech and outlasts our most fervent praise, so off we go into the six-day world to make of our very lives and work a song of gratitude and a prayer of thanksgiving. In the strong name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who taught us all to pray together, saying: Our Father.... Amen.

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