



## From the Pulpit: April 30, 2023

Fourth Sunday of Eastertide

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Luke 15:8–10

*The Valley of Lost Things, II: When You Get Dropped*

According to L. Frank Baum, the Valley of Lost Things is adjacent to the story of Oz. The floor of the Valley of Lost Things is covered with pennies, and thimbles, and pins, and scarves, and overcoats, and hats. Luke Chapter 15 is the Bible's Valley of Lost Things because Jesus tells three consecutive parables about four lost things: a lost lamb, a lost coin, and two lost sons, including this second story beginning at verse eight.

*"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

"In the Bible,  
from Genesis to  
Revelation, God is  
on a mad mission  
to find the lost."

George was 89 years old when he died 12 years ago. He didn't see very well at the end. With his Coke-bottle glasses, he looked a little like Mr. Magoo. But he had one of these huge Catholic Bibles about the size of a microwave oven, and he was always reading it from cover to cover.

There are exactly 1,189 chapters in his Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and so if he read one chapter a day, he could get through the whole Bible in three years, three months, and three days. When he finishes one iteration, he starts all over again, every three years, three months, and three days. And he doesn't skip anything, not even the lists of 'begat's. "That's cheating," he says. He told me he'd been through the whole Bible seven or eight times in the 25 years between his retirement and the day he died.

My friend George was the most devout Roman Catholic I've ever met. He lived across the street from my church in Greenwich. For some reason, he liked me so he worshipped with the Presbyterians every Sunday, but he goes to mass first on Saturday evening. He had about 50 sets of rosary beads and went without fail to confession every week.

George, by the way, was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago. He earned degrees from the University of Chicago and the University of Michigan. Could it get any better than that?

It's not a bad spiritual discipline; you could do worse, but full disclosure: I don't read the Bible cover to cover myself; I read Luke Chapter 15. I told you last week that Bible scholars sometimes call Luke Chapter 15 *The Gospel Within the Gospel*. Luke Chapter 15 is the terse précis of the entire Bible, the brief abstract for the sprawling dissertation the Bible finally turns out to be. Instead of three years, three months, and three days, it takes you about three minutes to read it.

The Bible is 1,985 pages long. It has 66 books written by about 50 different authors over a period of about a thousand years, but its plot is ridiculously simple. There are three cataclysmic but simple and straightforward plot twists in the Bible. Here's the whole story: (1) God creates the world in unspeakable loveliness; (2) The world gets lost; (3) In Jesus Christ, God restores the world to its original loveliness. That's the whole Bible. In the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, God is on a mad mission to find the lost.

So in Luke Chapter 15, Jesus tells three little stories about lost things—a lost lamb, a lost coin, and two lost sons. In the second of those stories, Jesus asks. “What woman, having ten coins and losing one, doesn't light a lamp, sweep the house, and scour the dark corners until she finds it?”

It's easy to lose a coin. Did you see the story of the Dime Heist in Philadelphia a couple of weeks ago? A truck driver had picked up a load of \$750,000 worth of dimes from the Philadelphia Mint. I'll do the math for you: that's 7.5 million dimes. The driver left the truck in a parking lot, and thieves made off with two million dimes. I'll do the math for you again—that's \$200,000 worth of dimes. The stolen dimes weighed 10,000 pounds. Nobody can figure out how they did it.

It's easy to lose a dime. Have you ever been dropped? Maybe they don't even miss you. Maybe you're a coin somebody dropped. Somebody estimated that there are 300 billion coins lying around on American beaches and streams and gutters or under your furniture at home or beneath vending machines.<sup>1</sup> I'll do the math for you again. Even if every one of those missing coins was a penny, there is a fortune worth three billion dollars lying around somewhere—unmissed, unsought, and lost, but still valuable. Go look for it.

I often walk the dog past the high school and come back to the church through that little pocket park across from the Indian Hill Train Station. I was reading The New York Times but happened to look down and saw a glint of silver shining up from a sidewalk gap, so I bent down and picked up a quarter and a dime, minted in 1993 and 1998 respectively. I'll bet they've been lying there for 25 years, lost and forgotten, and without purpose, just waiting for someone to find them, and to

put them back in circulation. I kept them as holy relics, small emblems of God's relentless searching grace.

Maybe you've been dropped. Maybe your first schoolboy crush dropped you like a hot frying pan in the seventh grade and broke your heart, and you're still scarred.

Maybe you'd been married for 16 years, but your husband thought of you as a dime and found a quarter instead; she's 15 years younger and surgically enhanced.

Maybe you'd been dreaming of attending the University of Virginia since you were a sophomore in high school, but somebody in the Charlottesville Admissions Department

dropped your application, and you got a thin envelope instead of fat one: “We regret to inform you...”

Maybe your husband **dropped** dead of a heart attack at the age of 49, and there you are with three college tuitions to pay and no job. He dropped dead, but you got dropped too.

But Somebody is looking for you. Would it spoil your image of God to see her as one of those odd folks waving metal detectors above the sand at Centennial Beach? There she is, scouring the beaches for your existence. Notice, by the way, that Jesus' image for God in his little story is a woman.

“Have you ever been dropped? Maybe they don't even miss you. Maybe you're a coin somebody dropped.... I kept them [dropped coins] as holy relics, small emblems of God's relentless searching grace.”

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<sup>1</sup>David Owen, “Penny Dreadful,” *The New Yorker*, March 31, 2008, p. 62.

There are half a million American children growing up in foster care just now. Many of them can't find foster families to live with, especially children older than ten, children with special needs, and African Americans.

You know that television show *Extreme Makeover*, where a team of dangerously skilled contractors completely redo a home for a poor family in a week? One Sunday evening in St. Louis, social worker Melanie Scheetz was watching *Extreme Makeover*, and she asked herself, "How can they build a whole house that fast? It's not superior **technology**; it's superior **planning**. It's getting everybody lined up on the same page at the same time in the same place with the apt resources and the necessary skill to do something wonderful."

So Melanie Scheetz started dreaming and came up with an organization called *Extreme Recruitment*. Ordinarily it takes a contractor several months to build a house; *Extreme Makeover* can do it in a few days. Ordinarily it takes Social Services one to five years to find a foster family for a foster child; *Extreme Recruitment* means to reduce that waiting period to less than 20 weeks.

How do they do it? They go out and look for the lost. Not the lost **lamb** or the lost **coin**. They **have** the lost **lamb**. They go out looking for the lost **relatives**. They hire private investigators and turn the gumshoes loose to look for aunts and uncles, cousins, anybody who **knows** or **is related to** this lost child by blood or kin. A foster kid growing up with strangers is always a foster kid, but a foster kid who grows up with relatives becomes Aunt Rita's nephew, and all the alien stigma of lostness vanishes.

In many ways Claire was a normal American teenager. She is pretty and stylish. She was on the dance team at her St. Louis high school. She is a good student. She wants to be a lawyer someday.

But Claire had been abused and neglected as a child and had lived in six different foster homes and group homes in recent years, and she is black, and she is 14, four years off from 'aging out' of the system and the terrible trouble that often follows.

Claire has a long file in the foster care system. Over all those years, her caseworkers had managed to find **six** of her relatives. When Extreme Recruitment sent their PI's out to look for the lost, they found **80** more of Claire's lost relatives. Eighty more! Including Stephanie, a 31-year-old divorced police detective with three children of her own.

Stephanie is the ex-wife of Claire's cousin. How's that for a shirt-tail relative? The ex-wife of a foster kid's cousin. Kin not by **blood**, but by **marriage**, a marriage that was **over**. Stephanie prayed about it and finally decided, "I have the resources, and she's family. Why not?"

Stephanie likes to brag about Claire's 3.9 GPA. Stephanie plans to take Claire to New York to meet Stephanie's brother, a lawyer, which Claire hopes to become one day.<sup>2</sup>

These Extreme Recruitment people just will not give up. They sweep the corners; they move the furniture; they heave the vending machine aside and gather up their treasure. They wave their magic-wand metal detectors over the sand at the beach until it starts beeping like an alarm clock.

It's just the smallest earthly emblem, the vaguest human hint, the humblest harbinger, of the vast, spacious, relentless, irrepressible, searching, searching, searching love of God, who will simply never give up until that tenth coin is deposited safely in God's piggy bank.

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<sup>2</sup>Curtis Sittenfeld, "Foster Care: Extreme Edition," *Time Magazine*, January 10, 2011, pp. 50–54.

**—The Prayers of the People—**  
**The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

Come, great Spirit hear us pray.  
The grey sky and rain,  
the blue sky and crisp air,  
a reminder that just beyond the ordinary  
is an unfolding miracle:  
the crabapple, redbud, and magnolia tree  
taking sun and rain to  
“blossom on the threshold of abundance”  
(Denise Levertov).  
We hardly stop to notice.  
Slow us down, O Divine Abundance.  
Open our eyes, O Love Made Known.  
The last tulip on the block opens this morning.  
The maple leaves open wide.  
The spring bunnies scurry under bushes,  
awake and alive to this day.

Shake us free what holds us captive,  
our narrow focus and forgetful spirit,  
and in increments let us return  
to full awareness of what unfolds:  
Your spirit, near.

Be for us a sure foundation,  
a cornerstone,  
love embodied.

Mend and tend to our mental health and well being.  
Let our nervous systems calm in your sanctuary.

Let us be glad for what does not hurt,  
and rise to meet even the worst challenge  
this day might bear.

Morning by morning, your grace pours forth.

Let us participate in receiving you this day,  
the vast extraordinary measure of love  
that flows from your great Spirit  
of shelter and protection.

Welcome just through  
the marked and unmarked entrances  
to your house of welcome and love.

We think now of those we love,  
those we know,  
those we know of  
who carry the heaviest burdens:  
where there is suffering, give relief,  
where there is sorrow, give comfort,  
where there is worry,  
give signs of change and possibility.

For places far from here—  
Sudan, Ukraine, Russia,  
Israel, Palestine,  
Haiti, Honduras  
—where gang violence, incessant war,  
and fragile ceasefire hold sway,  
Lord hear our prayer.

And for places closer in,  
here in our country where fear unfolds  
as states make sweeping laws  
removing access to care, services, and rights,  
Lord hear our prayer.

Give us voice.  
Give us energy to act.  
Give us love embodied.  
Morning by morning,  
your presence urging us toward a new vision.  
May your vision be our own.  
May your love be made known among us.  
May our hearts be changed.  
Hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us,  
saying: Our Father.... Amen.

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