



From the Pulpit: May 7, 2023
Fifth Sunday of Eastertide

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Luke 15:1–3, 11–24

According to L. Frank Baum, the *Valley of Lost Things* is adjacent to the story of Oz. Its floor is covered with pins and pennies and buttons and coats and scarves and hats. Luke chapter 15 is the *Bible's Valley of Lost Things*. Jesus tells three consecutive stories about lost things including the second one starting at verse 11:

So he told them this parable:

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was

"If you are lost, God wants to find you."

The Valley of Lost Things, III: Lost and Found dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found! And they began to celebrate.

In Luke Chapter 15, Jesus tells three consecutive stories about four lost things: a lost lamb, a lost coin, and two lost sons. Jesus' point in Luke Chapter 15 is the point of the entire Bible, the point of the entire history of God with God's people, and Jesus wants to make sure we get it. Luke Chapter 15 is the terse

précis, the pithy abstract of the sprawling dissertation the Bible finally turns out to be from Genesis to Revelation. If you are lost, God wants to find you.

Think of it. A man had two sons. This is an unstable triangle. Jesus' original audience would have thought of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Absalom and Solomon. Later readers will think of Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman*, Adam Trask from Steinbeck's *East of Eden*.

Or extrapolate. A man had **three** sons: Fred MacMurray, Ben Cartwright, Mike Brady. Logan Roy. A man had three daughters; too early, he divided his legacy among them, and failed to see which of them loved him more, and old Lear the foolish king is pelted by storms on the heath.

Have you noticed that Shakespeare based his *magnum opus*, *King Lear*, on the same initial plot device as Jesus' little parable? Foolishly, a man divides his inheritance to his heirs prematurely, while he is still alive. A man had two sons. A man had three daughters. All our stories begin this way, or most of them, because this is what is most precious to us, and most distressing.

A man had two sons, and the younger one came to him and said, "Father, give me my inheritance. Right now. I don't want to wait until you are dead." In other words, "Dad, I wish you were already dead." That's what the younger son is saying.

Inscrutably, the generous father complies. At great cost to himself and to his remaining older son, the man puts a second mortgage on his house, or borrows heavily against the small business the three of them have been running together, in order to get enough cash to forward the younger son's premature inheritance. Immediately the younger son runs off with his ill-gotten treasure and flees to a far country, where he squanders his inheritance in riotous living.

He squanders his inheritance in riotous living and ends up feeding slop to pigs. You understand what Jesus is telling us, don't you? Jews would rather *die* than touch pigs; they're unclean. Jesus is saying that he is scraping the bottom of the barrel. I see him dumpster-diving behind McDonald's. I see him holding out a tin cup on Michigan Avenue. What's the most demeaning work you could possibly do?

Then of course Jesus tells us that the young man 'came to himself.' He has a eureka moment; he eats his pride and decides to come home. In his little cubicle at the homeless shelter, he rehearses an endearing little speech. "Father, I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me one of your hired hands and save my life; save me from myself. I'll sweep the floor, I'll bus the tables, I'll pick the apples, I'll wash the cars."

He showers off the pig slop, packs his few belongings from the homeless shelter into his backpack, and hitches a ride back to what used to be home, rehearsing his little speech all the way there: "Father, I'm no longer worthy..., Father, I'm no longer worthy..., Father, I'm no longer worthy..."

But he never even gets the chance to use his little speech. While he's still several blocks away, barely with-

in sight, he sees his old man galloping towards him like Secretariat, running to meet him while he is yet far off.

By the way, this is neither here nor there, but do you know why he's called Mage? Mage is related to Magi and means 'Magician.' Well, I guess so! 15-1!

Well, anyway, the old man races to meet his son like a Kentucky Derby stallion and then crushes him in

"Foolishly, a man divides his inheritance to his heirs prematurely, while he is still alive."

a suffocating embrace and starts hollering orders to the household staff: "Bring me my finest robe, bring me my most expensive ring, throw me my most lavish party, for this son of mine was lost and now is found, he was dead and now is alive." This is a resurrection. This is one of Jesus' little Easters, not long before the Big One that will shortly arrive. We flee from home; God waits just there. We squander our inheritance; God grants extravagant

gifts. A robe, a ring, and a feast.

I've told you many times about my hero Greg Boyle, but I don't think I've told you about Bandit. For 35 years Father Greg has been a Roman Catholic priest in the poorest parish in Los Angeles. The largest public housing project west of the Mississippi is in his Dolores Parish. There are 86,000 gang members in LA, and eight active gangs in Father Greg's neighborhood. Father Greg has performed over 200 funerals for gang members, all of them young.

In 1992, Father Greg started what he called *Homeboy Industries*, a ministry to gang members, a ministry to the homies. Tattoo removal is a centerpiece of their ministry, because tattoos don't exactly endear the homies to employers. Their motto is "Nothing Stops a Bullet Like a Job," and so Father Greg started seeking out what he called 'felon-friendly employers,' and since, as you might expect, felon-friendly employers are rare, he started Homeboy Bakeries; they make Homeboy Tortillas. They have a Homegirl Café, and their selling point is, "If you like 'Waitresses with Attitude,' come to Homegirl Café."

One day Diane Keaton dines at Home-Girl Café and asks her waitress—a paroled felon named Glenda—what Glenda might recommend, and Glenda looks at Diane Keaton and says, “Wait a minute; I know you.” Diane Keaton humbly deflects the question by saying, “I guess I just have one of those faces.”

Glenda continues to stare at Diane Keaton. “Now I know,” she says. “We were locked up together.” Father Boyle says there have been no further Diane Keaton sightings at Home-Girl Café.

Father Greg—the homies call him G-Dog—Father Greg has been suffering from leukemia for years now. A while back Mariana approaches Father Greg shyly and says, “I hear your cancer’s in intermission.” Father Greg says, “Yeah, apparently it stepped out to the lobby to buy some popcorn; may the line be long.”

A homeboy named Grumpy says, “What do I have that you need?” He means his organs. Which of my organs do you need? The homies like to drive Father Greg to his chemotherapy treatments. Father Greg says drolly that the drive is far more harrowing than the chemo itself.

Fifteen years ago Father Greg comes up to a drug pusher named Bandit and asks, “Do you need a job?” Bandit says, “No thanks. I’m okay. I’m doing quite well actually.” Fifteen years later, Bandit comes up to Father Greg and says, “I’m tired of being tired. What about that job?” Father Greg finds him a felon-friendly factory to work in. He starts by sweeping the floors; now he manages a shift. He’s purchased his own home. He’s raising his kids there.

His eldest daughter Jessica gets accepted to Humboldt State University in the heart of California Redwood Country. Besides Father Greg, Jessica is the only person Bandit knows who’s ever been to college.

If you ask Bandit what Jessica wants to study, he will tell you, “She wants to study Forensic Psychology. She wants to study the criminal mind. I’m her first subject.”

Father Greg says to Bandit, “I’m so proud of the man you’ve decided to become.” Bandit says, “I’m proud of me too.”¹

“Father Greg must have read Jesus’ little story about the lost son, and he decided to step into the role of the Waiting Father. Lost and Found.”

To Father Greg, they’re not *sinners*; they’re just *lost*. Father Greg must have read Jesus’ little story about the lost son, and he decided to step into the role of the Waiting Father. Lost and Found.

Is there someone in your life who needs a second chance? Is there someone in your life who needs a welcome home? It’s something to think about.

¹Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion* (New York: Free Press, 2010). Some of this material also comes from a lecture by Father Boyle, with the same title, at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, on January 12, 2011, The Calvin College January Series.

—The Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Holy God, Gracious Spirit,
We approach you with hearts awakened by the spring
flourishing.
New life emerges from the much-maligned Midwest
weather:
Trillium, scented lilacs, and crabapples bursting with
bloom,
While overhead a great avian migration,
Brings the first hummingbirds,
and sandhill cranes to trumpet the news.
Daily you bring us delight upon delight.

Let these divine delights shape our days, soften our
hardened edges,
And form our songs of praise.
Abide with us, Lord, in these sacred places,
Move us from our siloed and solitary tendencies
And make us to be a sanctuary, a community of care.

Abide with us, O God as we breathe in your grace.
Let us exhale deep love, for creation and neighbor, and
All with whom we share this dazzling blue marble with.

When our lives veer off course,
Abide with us in the dense thicket of broken
relationships and unkept promises.
Shepherd us in the dark valleys of grief and loss.
Guard us along the frightening backroads and wrong
turns.

Holy One, join the wide wildernesses of our lives into
one landscape,
Where we might travel together, sharing our sorrows
and joys.
Let us be hopeful companions to one another,
As we find our way home to you.
Abide with those facing uncertain futures, in places
near and far,
Where there is no peace,
Where there is not enough,
Where home is no longer safe.
Hear our prayers for the people of Dallas. Heal the
wounded,
Bless the innocent lives lost and comfort the
traumatized.

Hear our prayers, Holy God, for leaders who seek to
serve not to be served.
Inspire them to find purpose in the common good and
to resist the lure of power.
Give us all imagination to address the intolerable
challenges of our time and a desire to:
To protect the rights of the vulnerable,
To craft the ceasefire,
To create a world where the children know only
The possibility of flourishing as the people you created
them to be.

For you, Holy God, are our true hope.
With delight-softened hearts, we trust you abide with
us in the joy and sorrows of life.
And so, show us the way to be light and love
To others, in the name of Jesus Christ who teaches us
to pray: Our Father...Amen.

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