

“Lost and Found”
Sermon by Ray Anderson, Guest Preacher
Peace United Church of Christ
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How many of you have a cat? I know, Mary, you have 2 cats. Well, don't throw anything at me, then, because this is a story about a man who hated his wife's cat. He decided to get rid of the cat, so he put the cat in his car and drove about ten blocks from his house. He opened the door and let out the beast and drove home. When he got home and drove into his driveway, there was the cat. So, the next day he said "I'm going to take it further", so he took that cat and went 20 blocks from his house and threw the beast out. He came back home, pulled in the driveway, and guess who was there—the cat! So, the third day he thought enough was enough, so he took the cat and drove it about 20 miles away. A couple of hours later his wife got a call. It was her husband. He asked "Jen, is the cat there?" She asked "Yes, why?" He said "Put the little fleabag on the phone because I'm lost and I need directions".

In our text today, Jesus is telling three stories about things that were lost—items of great value to those who lost them. A man lost a sheep. He left 99 in the field until he found that one. A woman lost a coin probably worth about \$25-\$50 today, and she swept the whole house until she found it. A man lost his son, and he constantly looked towards the horizon for a glimpse of his child. They were all looking for what they had lost.

You know, these are pretty good stories. You can probably visualize these situations, but Jesus wasn't telling these stories to entertain the crowd. He had a specific audience that needed to hear what he had to say. Those were the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. These Pharisees and teachers were representatives of God and their society. They were the men who would be most familiar with God's word. Why would these religious people be so upset about Jesus eating with sinners?

Samuel Colgate, the founder of the Colgate business empire was a devout Christian. During an evangelistic service that he attended at a local church, an invitation was given at the close of the sermon for all of those who wished to turn their lives over to Christ, be forgiven, and join that church. One of the first persons to walk down the aisle was a well known prostitute. She wept openly as she expressed her desire to become a Christian and become a member of that church. For a few moments, the silence was deafening. This was in the days when churches actually voted on who would become a member of their congregation. It became apparent that these people did not want this person in their church.

This was the attitude of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. To their way of thinking, when a person sins so much, they became worthless, and they became like the garbage that we put out on the street and wait for the truck to come and haul away. Once a person reached that level of sinfulness, they were no longer of any value to God or to man, or at least that is what the religious leaders thought but, you see, Jesus was saying to these Pharisees, these teachers, "Look, I don't think you understand. These are exactly the people I came for—these tax collectors and sinners. These are those who have been lost to God because of their sins". Apparently Samuel Colgate understood this, too. Mainly, he was even thinking about these parables in Luke, when he arose and said "I guess we blundered when we prayed that the Lord would save sinners. We forgot to specify what kind of sinners. We'd better ask Him to forgive us for this oversight". Well, almost immediately a motion was made and unanimously approved that the woman be accepted into membership into that congregation.

There is something interesting about these parables that I want to share with you. First of all, there were three of them. Any one of these stories would have proven Jesus' point, but He told

three parables. Why? Well, I think probably because that is what God always seems to do. When God wants us to remember something, He repeats himself. When God wants us to remember something, He repeats himself. When He wants to capture our attention, He tells us the same things over and over again in many different ways.

In addition to all these parables, they are slightly different. A man had 100 sheep. He lost 1/100 of his property. He searched the countryside until he found it. A woman with ten coins lost 1/10 of her possessions, and she searched the house until she could return it to its rightful place. A father had two sons and lost half of his children. He earnestly watched and waited until his son returned. Each parable tells a story of items that are increasingly more valuable. It is almost as if Jesus is saying "Look, it may not matter how valuable a person may seem to you. God will do whatever is necessary to find that which is lost".

One more thing about these parables: A man lost one of his sheep. What did he do? He searched until he found it. A woman lost one of her coins. What did she do? She searched until she found it and put it back. A father lost his son. What did he do? He stayed home. The father didn't go off looking for his son. He didn't call the police. He didn't organize a search party. He just stayed home. Well, that doesn't seem quite right, does it? Why would the shepherd and the woman search for that which they had lost, and then when they found it, put it back where it belonged while a father just sat at home on the porch? Doesn't the father care? Of course he cares, but there is something we need to understand and that is the Prodigal Son is not a sheep or a coin. Sheep and coins are commodities. They are things to be owned, things to be collected and stored away, but you couldn't do that with the Prodigal Son. The Prodigal Son was an individual with a free will. What would have happened if the father had gone into that foreign land and tried to get that son back home. Do you really think that the son would have gone willingly? Probably not, because, until the son decided he was going to return, he would always be lost.

The key to the story of the Prodigal Son is the fact that the father had to wait until the son wanted to come home. You see, as much as the father wanted his son to return, as much as he would have done anything to convince the boy of his love for him, he still had to wait until the son made the decision, as it is with God. As much as God wants His children to return to Him, and as much as He would do anything to convince us of His love, the decision still has to be yours and mine to make. It is called free will, and it is one of God's greatest gifts to each and every one of us.

Let me tell you a story about what happened to Ted Forbes back in 1984. You will like this. While walking down a street in Chicago, Ted found a wallet. Being an honest, Christian man, he wanted to return it to its owner, so he opened it to look for identification. The wallet contained only \$3—no driver's license, no social security card, no pictures, nothing to indicate who owned the billfold. Looking through the wallet a little more, Ted found an old envelope. It was wrinkled, and it looked as if it had been carried there for many years. The only part of the writing on the envelope that could be read was the return address. To find more information, Ted opened the envelope. To his surprise, the letter was dated June 6, 1924. The letter had been written nearly 60 years before. It was a "Dear John" letter. It was written to a man named Michael. It was from a woman named Hannah. She explained that, though she loved him, and that she would always love him, her parents had forbidden her to see him anymore.

Ted Forbes wanted to locate the owner of the lost wallet, so he drove to the location listed on the return address. He parked the car, walked up to the door, and a woman answered the door. Ted asked the woman if she knew a Michael or a Hannah. He was told that, 30 years ago she had purchased a house from a family whose daughter was named Hannah. She said that Hannah had placed her mother in a nursing home just a few blocks down the street.

Ted drove to the nursing home and explained the story to the nursing supervisor. She told Ted that the lady he was trying to find had died; however, she gave him a telephone number where he might locate Hannah.

Calling that number, he learned that Hannah was not living there anymore. The person answering the phone said that Hannah was now living in an apartment house for the elderly.

Ted began to wonder why he was making such a big deal out of an old wallet which only contained \$3 and a crumpled up old letter, but he felt like he had to keep going. He finally tracked down Hannah. He went to visit her at the apartment house for the elderly. She had an apartment on the third floor. Ted knocked on the door. A grey-haired, alert, bright-eyed lady with a warm smile on her face answered the door. Yes, it was Hannah Marshall. Ted told her about finding the wallet. He showed her the letter and asked if she knew someone named Michael. Hannah took the letter. Tears filled her eyes. She told Ted that the letter was the last contact she had with Michael. She said she had never married because she had never met anyone she had loved as much as Michael, then she asked Ted if, when he found Michael, he would tell him that she still loved him and that she thought about him every day.

Well, Ted thanked her and left and, as he was walking down the apartment house hallway, he was carrying the wallet in his hand. The janitor saw the wallet and stopped Ted in the hallway. He said, "Let me see that wallet". Ted handed it to him. "Why, that's Mr. Goldstein's wallet", he said. "I would know it anywhere. He's always losing it". Ted asked if he could find Mr. Goldstein. The janitor said that he lived in apartment #6 on the eighth floor, so Ted quickly made his way to the eighth floor. He found apartment #6 and knocked on the door. Sure enough, an old man named Michael answered the door. Ted showed the wallet to the old man. He asked if it was his. Yes, it was. Ted admitted reading the letter to seek identification of the owner. Mr. Goldstein asked "You read it?", then he told Ted that his life nearly ended many, many years ago when he lost Hannah. He never married and had never stopped loving her. Ted said "Mr. Goldstein, I think I know where Hannah is". The old man became very excited, and Ted simply took him by the hand, walked him to the elevator, and down they went to the third floor, to Hannah Marshall's apartment, #6. When she opened the door, they looked at one another in disbelief. Michael Goldstein walked slowly towards Hannah. He took her in his arms, and the 60 years of separation evaporated in the warmth of their love.

About three weeks after Michael and Hannah were reunited, Ted got a call asking him to be their best man. They were to be married after years of separation. It must have been some sight—a 79 year old man and a 76 year old woman acting like teenagers—a perfect end to a tragic separation! They had every reason to celebrate, and it all took place because something that was lost was found.

You see, my friends, it is the person who is the farthest away who needs our love, and we need to be willing to go to extraordinary lengths to bring that person back. Did you ever realize that you were so important to God that he is looking for you? Did you know that, if you were the only one who had needed it, God still would have sent His son just for you? Remember the words of Jesus, "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents".

I want to say thank you to Pastor Tom for offering me this opportunity to speak to you today. It really does look a little different up here on this side. I'm used to being over there. I just want all of you to know how much I appreciate your prayers and your support. I am blessed to know each of you, and I am happy to call each of you my friend. Thanks be to God for the wonderful work that He continues to do here at Peace United Church of Christ. Amen.