

Wesley United Methodist Church

September 15, 2013

"Finder's Keepers."

Luke 15:1-10

There's an old, old story, that I think is still funny. The phone rings and a little boy answers in a whisper: "Hello?" The caller says: "Hi, is your Mommy there?" "Yes!" "Can I talk to her?" "No!" "Why not?" "She's busy." "What about your Daddy, can I talk to him?" "No! He's busy." "Well, is there anyone else there?" "My little sister." "Is anyone else there, another adult?" "Uh huh, the police." "Can I talk to one of them?" "No, they're busy." "Is there anyone else there?" "Yes, the firemen." "Can I talk to one of them?" "No, they're busy, too." Caller: "Good heavens, your whole family's busy, the police and the fire departments are there and they're busy! What's everybody doing?" The little boy giggled and whispered: "They're looking for me."

Today's Scripture is about searching and finding. It's an old story that illustrates the frantic nature of people who have lost something and are in search of it. Remember, "Finder's Keepers, Loser's Weepers?" You used to use it when your brother or sister dropped a nickel or a dime and you found it. It was your way of laying claim to that which had been lost.

In our Scripture, Jesus not only illustrates the frantic nature of those doing the searching; he also shows how much rejoicing there is for the one who is found. It really is Finder's Keepers. When you find that which was lost, you want to tell everyone. Isn't that true. Don't you start hollering when you've found the car keys you've misplaced? I know there will be rejoicing when we find the case with all the office software in it and all the stuff from the kitchen. They're in a box somewhere, we just don't know where but I know we'll rejoice.

Today I want us to look at Heavenly Finder's Keepers. Let's look at it through the Lost, the Found, and the Party.

Have you ever been lost? Get turned around and not knowing where you are? Or have you ever been driving along, driving down the road in very familiar surroundings. Everything around you is something you know. You could probably drive that road or that street in your sleep. But then you go around a corner or make a turn and suddenly everything has changed? And not only has it changed but it seems to speed up and run almost out of control. and before you know it, it's faster and faster? You don't know how to slow down or even stop. That's what being lost feels like.

I'm not sure the Lost Sheep really knew it was lost until the Shepherd started calling for it. It truly may have thought that the flock was right behind it. They were the last time the sheep looked. And while the Sheep made a conscious effort to wander away, the coin is another thing. Someone may have jiggled the stack or

bumped it. Maybe it slipped through a hole in the money purse. Who knows. The woman in the parable went looking for it and couldn't find it. And then the frantic search began. Maybe it was only grocery money. But it could have been her entire life savings. It could be money she was saving for the Temple offering. Who knows, but it was important and she went searching.

What's important is that both the sheep and the coin were lost. And that meant someone else could holler "Finder's Keepers" if the shepherd and the woman didn't search.

The Good News is that we have a God who doesn't forget about the lost. God doesn't write them off as sinners unworthy of redemption. God's love is too big for that. We may be unworthy but that's beside the point because God offers redemption anyway. Through the love of God and the Sacrifice of Christ we are offered both forgiveness and redemption. That's called grace. That's the only thing that commends us to God.

Not only does God offer redemption but the good news is that we have a Savior who searches for the lost. He is the shepherd who leaves the 99 and searches for the one lost sheep. He is the woman with 10 silver coins and lost one. He sweeps and cleans high and low until the coin is found. And then all heaven rejoices because we've been brought home. Because the Lost has been restored.

Remember the movie "Cheaper by the Dozen?" One of the youngest boys, Mark, is at that awkward age where he doesn't feel like he fits in, even in his big family. He's the only one who wears glasses. They tease him and call him Fed Ex. They tell him that the Fed Ex man brought him. Dad is a coach whose dream has always been to coach his alma mater. He gets that opportunity about the same time that Mom gets a book (about the family) published and has to go on a book signing tour, leaving Dad to care for 12 kids in a new community in which they didn't want to move.

Well, in the movie, Mark seems to be the most miserable. And to top it off, his pet frog, Beans, dies and he decides to run away because "big families stink." The entire family gets into the search. Dad is the one who finds him on the Amtrak. He's headed back to their old home because it's his one favorite place. Dad finds him and he's not lost anymore. Dad embraces him. And after the long trip, guess who's waiting for him. The entire family. There's reconciliation and laughter and tears. Rejoicing.

That's the way God and the angels in heaven react when any one of us fall away and get lost. Or when any one comes to Christ for the first time. There is rejoicing. God throws a party in our honor. And we should rejoice with God.

The real problem with the Pharisees is that they wanted to be the Keepers instead of the Finders. And when we sit like the Pharisees were doing, and look down our nose at people who are different or people who aren't living the faith,

that's what we're doing, trying to be the Keepers instead of the Finders. When we sit in judgment of others, in essence, we've moved God out of His rightful throne and taken over. Unfortunately, that's a Corky No! No! That's not our job.

We're called to be Seekers. Because, in actuality, there are only two kinds of people in the world. Those who know and have experienced the forgiveness of God and those who haven't. We're not called to judge. Instead, we're called to Seek and Rejoice because someone else has found the love and grace and forgiveness that we're experienced.

That's why God throws the party. It's a Birthday party. Or a new Birth day party.

Tony Campolo, in his book *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*. tells one of my favorite stories.

On one of his trips from the East Coast to Hawaii, he tells of the time when he found himself awake long before dawn because of the time difference. Rather than trying to force himself to go back to sleep, he got dressed and wandered up and down the streets in Honolulu looking for a place to eat breakfast. He found a little place on a side street, walked in, and sat down on one of the stools at the counter. Everything he touched, including the menu, felt sticky with grease. When the guy behind the counter came over and asked, "What do you want?" Tony Campolo ordered a cup of coffee and a doughnut.

As he sat there munching on his doughnut and sipping his coffee at 3:30 in the morning, the door of the diner swung open. Much to his dismay and discomfort, in marched eight or nine provocative and loud prostitutes. It was a small diner so they sat on both sides of him. Their talk was loud and crude. Of course, Tony felt completely out of place and was just about to make a quick getaway when he overheard one of the women say, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine." One of her friends snapped back, "So what! What do you want me to do? Throw you a party?" The woman replied, "Come on, why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you it was my birthday. I don't want anything from you. Why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life."

As soon as he heard that, Tony made his decision. He waited until the women had left then he called over the guy behind the counter and asked, "Do they come here every night?" "Yeah," he answered. Tony went on to say, "I overheard the one named Agnes say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think about throwing a party for her, right here, tomorrow night?" A smile crossed over the man's chubby cheeks. He called out his wife and told her about the plan.

At 2:30 the next morning, Tony Campolo was back at the diner. They decorated the diner from one end to the other with crepe paper and made a big sign out of cardboard that read "Happy Birthday, Agnes!" Evidently word had gotten out and

by 3:15 A.M. the place was packed. Promptly at 3:30 A.M., the door of the diner swung open and in walked Agnes and her friend. Everybody was ready and screamed, "Happy Birthday!" Agnes was stunned and shaken. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle a bit. One of her friends grabbed her arm to steady her and led her to one of the stools at the counter as the crowd sang "Happy Birthday" to her. Her eyes moistened, then, when the birthday cake with thirty-nine lit candles was carried out, Agnes totally lost it and sobbed like a child.

When the party finally came to a close and Agnes walked out the door, there was a stunned silence in the diner. Not knowing what else to do, Tony Campolo broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray for Agnes?" He prayed that night for Agnes. He prayed for her salvation. He prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her. When he finished, the guy leaned over the counter and said, "Hey! you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

In one of those rare moments when just the right words came, Tony Campolo answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning." The guy waited a moment and then he almost sneered as he replied, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that."

That's what every church should be like. Because that's what God's love is like. And that's what we're called to be like. We're called to look beyond the outer person and see a child of God, loved by God just like we're loved by God. And we are called to offer them spontaneous, authentic, unconditional grace filled love. Love without any strings attached.

There are millions of Finders but there can only be one Keeper. And that's not us. It's God. As Finders we're called to find the Lost and then be part of the party in heaven and celebrate when they are found.