

“I’m happy for you. Really!”
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 28:6-9
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 15:1-10

“What do you mean, you can’t find it?” If you are an adolescent withering under the roar of parental outrage, if you are married and confronted with the ire of a spouse testing the limits of *for better or for worse*, if you are an employee whose boss looks like they’re going to pop a neck vein as this loaded and loud question rattles your eardrums, somehow you can intuitively sense that you’re about to have a bad day. “What do you mean, you can’t find it?” Has anyone ever devised an adequate answer to that question? I can’t imagine why the observation *I can’t find it* would be thought all that esoteric. What part of *I can’t find it* is so vague that it requires further explanation?

But don’t you just love the seemingly requisite follow-up question: “Where did you last have it?” Cue the eye rolls and sarcasm, a teen’s sweet spot: “If I knew that, it wouldn’t be lost, would it?” The coinciding question is seldom helpful: “How could you lose it?” *Well, Socrates, let’s focus on the where and not the how.* Now’s not the time for philosophy. But, like I said, you are at the debut of a bad day.

Reflecting on today's text, Mary Shertz observes that, "all of us have experienced a crisis that abruptly turns our attention from the macrocosm to the microcosm." (Mary Shertz, *The Christian Century*)

You've had the hiking trip in Patagonia scheduled for months, bought new boots, decked yourself out with North Face, Arc'teryx, Danner, and Osprey, driving to REI so many times they greet you like Norm from *Cheers*. Yet, as you are tossing your gear in the back of the SUV because it's time to go to the airport, it dawns on you that you'll need to bring your passport ... your passport ... your passport. Hmmm, where is your passport? You immediately regret putting so much thought into finding a secure and secret place to store it, because, somehow, that memory icon has been dragged to the trash ... When your brain is about to discard some bit of critical stored information, don't you wish that it was programmed to make the sound your computer makes when dumping a file - *SKISH!* Are you sure you really want to lose that? "No, let's save that!"

Your passport, where is your passport? Even if you're lucky enough to not have a parent nearby to harangue you during your frantic search, your blood pressure is still through the roof. Drawers are being ripped open,

socks are flying, couch cushions dislodged, cabinets ransacked. If you do still manage to make the flight, you now know you'll be coming home to a wrecked house.

Such are the crises that abruptly turn our attention from the macrocosm to the microcosm. A child wanders from the swing set at the park while you're distracted; you pull out your wallet to pay for your meal and the debit card isn't there; that check from the insurance company was mailed in the same nondescript envelope that their promotions come in, and suddenly you find yourself diving into your recycle bin. Your carefree day is immediately transformed into a panicked, laser-focused, nightmarish search.

But this isn't the golf ball you decide is not worth the venture into the poison ivy; this is the no-holds barred, wade into the sewer if you have to kind of scavenging reserved for that which is so precious to your heart or so essential to your way of life that your tomorrows will be darkened and diminished without it.

A shepherd with one hundred sheep discovers one missing, leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and goes after the one that is lost until he finds it. A woman with ten coins, each worth a day's wage, loses one of

them, lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until she finds it. You know, you understand, the concept of something or someone so precious, so much a part of your identity, so intrinsic to your well-being that losing it or them would launch you into a hyper-focused search, (as the greeting card suggests) climbing the highest mountain, fording the widest river, collapsing wet and exhausted on the carpet just to find once again who or what is so treasured.

What makes the list for you, or more significantly who makes the list for you? Whose absence inspires you to drop everything, forsake all commitments and focus on the one thing that matters in the moment?

Do you know who makes God's list? You. Do you know who else? Everyone. From the screamer in the nursery to the whiner in the nursing home, from the insufferable to the cherished, from the pauper to the princess, from the vagrant to the viscount, from the rude to the benevolent, from the frenzied acquaintance who lives in crisis mode to the preternaturally calm colleague who can sleep anywhere at anytime, there is no one whom God will not feel it worth pursuing, no one unworthy of a

search party. And guess what? There is no one who doesn't have need to be found at some point in life.

Jesus is intent in our text to convey these two truths to all those gathered to hear him and to all of us who have gathered to overhear his parables in this hour of worship. As we discussed last week, Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem, and with him is a growing and diverse throng of followers. You have apostles, just appointed by Jesus to a formidable calling far beyond what they as yet can imagine. You have disciples, folks who have come to believe that Jesus has been sent by God for their salvation. You have those intrigued but not convinced by Jesus' words. You have those who saw a crowd and thought there may be food. You have those extroverts plagued with the fear that if two or three are gathered together and they're not one of them, they'll be missing out.

And also in the mix are the self-appointed gatekeepers, perhaps a bit smug with their insider status among the temple crowd. Some were intrigued but many of the religious insiders were suspicious of Jesus, skeptical of his authority, disturbed by his breach of temple laws, and scandalized or offended by the class of people drawing near to the rabbi.

Luke says these religious hall monitors were busy murmuring. “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” They’re not even in a mood to dignify Jesus with a name. This *fellow*, this *cretin*, this *poser*... It’s not like they don’t know his name. This illusion of superiority, always and without fail, undermines any hope of community. To be infected with such arrogant dismissiveness exposes a lack of self-understanding because wherever we are in life and whatever we have accomplished, the altitude never changes in the eyes of God. If we look up to our Lord in heaven, we can never look down upon our neighbor. Isn’t it ironic that there are those outside the church whose frame of mind reflects the nearness of God than many inside the church because they at least recognize that they are sinners. One should never need a ladder to enter the church.

Our hearts should skip a beat in joyful anticipation each time we encounter someone we have not met in this place. With each unfamiliar face, we should hear the Lord’s voice from Isaiah, “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Each introduction is a cause for celebration. That’s why we made the narthex out there so wide. Maybe we need to add a disco ball and some Earth, Wind, and Fire to evoke the party spirit of Christ drawing people together.

For both the shepherd and the woman missing a c-note, discovery is a reason to party - chairs to the wall, feet on the floor, hands in the air, the bass beat shakin' the chandelier. Stuff the fliers into mailboxes, call the caterer, blow up some balloons, fill the cooler with ice, pile the nachos high, wire up the speakers, open up the doors, and bust out the dancin' moves, 'cause there's a party goin' on.

“And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” “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.”

Jesus is asking the religious upper crust and Jesus is asking us, why should it be hard to share in someone's good news? Why is that sometimes so difficult for us? We hear someone's good news and beneath the forced smiles the bile of jealousy, resentment, and worst of all, judgment boil in

our innermost being. The conviction that someone is awarded something they don't deserve is the most bitter of acids: It eats both self and subject, destroys community, and opposes Christ. When Christ is working in someone's life, I shouldn't be so hard for us to say, *I'm happy for you*, and mean it. Years ago, a regional, formal group of Presbyterians gathered together to hear a request that we crack open the doors a little wider to welcome those previously shunned. The request would require us to imagine Jesus welcoming, worshiping, and rejoicing with many who had previously been hurt and dismissed just for being who they were born to be. As the recommendation was being shared, two men stood, turned their backs to the speaker and bowed their heads as if in prayer. As I witnessed their action and imagined Jesus looking down upon the scene, the shortest verse of the Bible seemed the most descriptive: "Jesus wept."

On the list of those who have **earned** their way into fellowship with Jesus, those two aren't on it. And guess what? We're not on it, either. No one is. In fact, there is no such list ... And so, maybe we should stop looking for it. Wouldn't our time be better spent stuffing mailboxes with invitations and setting up for the party? No one should be left out. It would be such a

shame to miss it. For there is joy to share in the presence of the angels of
God. Amen.