

Introduction

One of the things I have found as I grow older is that I seem to spend more of my time looking for things I have mislaid. Sometimes it doesn't matter much but other times it can be serious. When I mislay my car keys I get very anxious and don't stop looking until I find them. Without my car I can't do my job so I value my car keys.

Our passage in Luke's Gospel tells of similar frantic searches for things that are lost and that the owner wants back. These stories tell us of God's attitudes to those who have lost their way and are lost to him.

Jesus' stories show there are different ways in which people and things become lost.

The coin Luke 15:8 is lost because of the woman's inattention and carelessness. In the case of the lost sheep and the lost son, which we didn't read but is part of this chapter and familiar to most of us, it is due to their own waywardness and silliness.

The contrariness of the sheep is legendary. It is amazing how sheep will ignore acres of good pasture and risk their life for the thin strip of grass beside a busy road. For the prodigal son it was the prospect of wild living and being able to live as he liked that lured him away. (v 13)

In the stories in Luke 15: 4 and 8, both the woman and the shepherd put considerable time and effort into their search. Jesus' listeners would appreciate the time needed to sift through the dirt of an earth floor or the

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

dangers involved in tramping across hills and valleys in search of the sheep. In God's eyes every single human being is precious and he longs to restore them to relationship with him. He searches until he finds them.

One of my favourite books of the Bible is the Book of Hosea which is a parable of God's relationship with his people. Chapter 11 speaks of God's great love for his people and his commitment and compassion for them and we hear a story of longing and searching and rejection. Yet a story of complete faithfulness and commitment to the loved and lost one

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and I called my son out of Egypt.
2 But the more I called to him,
the farther he moved from me,
offering sacrifices to the images of Baal
and burning incense to idols.
3 I myself taught Israel how to walk,
leading him along by the hand.
But he doesn't know or even care
that it was I who took care of him.
4 I led Israel along
with my ropes of kindness and love.
I lifted the yoke from his neck,
and I myself stooped to feed him.

We see here the pain of a loving father who cares deeply for his offspring yet sees them walk away from him. In the third of Jesus' parables, we are told how the father loved his son and so he let him go – although it caused him great sadness and hurt. He simply waited and watched for his son's return. A long

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and painful wait; but he chose to allow his son to make his own mistakes and ultimately to choose to return or not. So he waited – as God often waits for us. And when he saw the son in the distance he ran to greet him, to welcome him back and to celebrate his return

Hosea chapter 11 goes on to express God's anger at his people's waywardness and expresses his decision to abandon them. But he is unable to give up on them and decides to wait until the return again

8 "Oh, how can I give you up, Israel?

How can I let you go? My heart is torn within me, and my compassion overflows.

The purpose of these parables that Jesus told was to teach the Pharisees and teachers of the law who attacked Jesus' friendship with sinners. They thought that if Jesus was holy he wouldn't associate with sinful people. They completely missed the point because ours is the God who loves sinners and actively seeks them out. Jesus not only identified with those outside religious or polite society he ate with them and shared fellowship with them and challenges us to do the same. Jesus introduces the elder brother in verse 28 as a challenge to us to rejoice over the sinner's return, rather than condemning them for failure and weakness, which we ourselves are not immune to.

Like the Good shepherd described in the book of Ezekiel, God actively seeks out those of us who have strayed - and where there is repentance accepts us back into the fold amid great rejoicing. The people that Jesus is seeking are those who are lost and wounded

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by life. Those who have given up on themselves and whom society have given up on. In our villages it is easy to lose sight of the fact that many people really struggle with life. Here we don't always see the struggles people have to deal with and we are protected from the sight of homeless people sleeping on the streets and drug addicts hanging about on street corners.

But, as Christians, We are called not to give up on people but to welcome them and to actively seek them to show God's love to them.

God's purpose is to seek out the lost, the wounded and the vulnerable

to love and care for them

to bring them home to him

Jesus made it clear that his reason for coming into our world was to seek out and save the lost (Luke 19:10) Ultimately this meant dying for us on the cross. As his followers we too should be involved in the search for the lost, with all its unpalatable complications. It may mean reaching out to the unlovely and the ungrateful. It certainly means a great deal more than staying safely in our church buildings and cautiously welcoming people in. We need to be aware of what it means for many thousands to be lost.

So many people don't know God, don't know how much he loves them and don't know that he simply wants to live in relationship with them. Many people look for fulfilment in finding fame, success, riches; they are

1 Timothy 1:12-17**Luke 15:1-10**

seeking for answers and not finding them. As Jesus's followers we are called to tell them of God's love for them, to reach out and touch them with his love and compassion.

We may not ourselves be called to live or work first hand in challenging situations but we are called to be aware and to support those who are on the front line dealing every day with damaged and broken lives. That was part of my role in Hackney where many of the people I worked amongst were very vulnerable, abused by those they looked to for help and where children suffered hunger and fear and insecurity.

We need to be aware that there are many thousands who are lost and need to know God's love. We need to give support, financially and through prayer and also by making ourselves aware those in our community who need help. So that we can be informed and creative in the way we respond. What we are not called to is to indifference. Jesus shows us that we need grace to reach out to people that we might otherwise dismiss as lost causes.

Prayer

Help me not to mind my own business, Lord. My brother or sister's absence from our community is my business. Help me to notice those who have drifted away. Grant me the courage to risk going after them, and show me what I must do.

Amen.