

Sermon for Sunday, September 15, 2013 Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28, Luke 15:1-10 "Lost and Found"

We were talking in Book Group the other day about adoption – it's a subject I know something about, since I myself am adopted. Some of the group wondered about how I felt about being adopted. Their question were ones that are often posed to those of us who are adopted. Did I long to know more about my birth parents? Did I ever search for them, as the writer of the book we are reading had done? My answers were pretty simple. I always knew that I was adopted, and that I was cherished by my adoptive parents. I was chosen, rather than a product of a random act of reproduction. I was, in fact, found.

That word found is an important one as we sit together today in this place, because the readings really swirl around the idea of "lost and found." In Jeremiah, the people have lost their concept of their creator and seemingly cannot find their way back to him. In the Gospel, once again we have someone who is lost and must be found.

Are we lost? Are we found?

I'd contend that we are a little of both.

In my own adoption story, my birth mother gave me up. She could not take care of me as a single mother in the 1950s. My adoptive parents, who had struggled for years unsuccessfully to have a child of their own, wanted a child desperately. I was lost, then I was found, and thank God for that. I never felt the need to go find my birth parents. But many years later, I needed to find out some medical history, and I reached out to the adoption agency that placed me. The social worker wanted to know why I wanted to contact my birth mother. Just medical history, I said. I had no need for another mother – the one who raised me was plenty enough. If she wanted to talk or correspond, though, I would welcome it. And so the social worker got in touch with my birth mother, and I found myself wondering what would happen if indeed she wanted contact with me. Would she expect me to treat her as my mother? Would she want me to support her? What were my obligations, and what would she be like? Eventually, the social worker got back to me. No family history relating to the medical issue I asked about. No family medical history information at all, and the birth mother did not want any contact. I was vaguely disappointed – in a way it felt like she was handing me off again, as she had many years ago. The social worker suggested I write a letter to my birth mother to put in the file, in case she changed her mind. I did that, but never heard anything more. I presume she is dead, since she would be almost 100 by now. But the social worker did an interesting thing. She sent me some notes about the circumstances of my birth and some information about my birth parents. Not names, of course, since I was adopted in the time of closed adoptions. But I found out a lot that was helpful to me in the sense that I started to know a little about my heritage. What I found in that sharing of information was a bit of what I had lost, and didn't even know that I had been missing.

That's one of the markers of losing things. I don't know about you, but I usually don't even realize they're missing until something happens that calls attention to the fact of the loss. I don't know that I've misplaced the car keys until I head out the door and can't find them in my purse. I don't know that I've lost my cellphone until I remember I need to call someone. Does it work that way for you, too?

In the same way, we don't realize we've lost our connection to God – that it has slipped away somehow because of distraction or neglect – until we need God, and we wonder where He's gone to. In point of fact, it isn't God who is lost and in need of finding. It's us.

God is always there. In truth, he usually is the one who keeps looking for us, whispering in our ears, "hey, remember me?"

Now there are times when we are not really lost: we are hiding from God, just as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden when they did a bad thing and were ashamed. We have turned away because we have done something, or have not done something, and we think that if we just act like ostriches and stick our heads in the sand, God won't see the rest of us wiggling around in the air. We might hide. We might think that God can't find us. But he can, and does. So it is, perhaps more like being aware that he is there than it is wondering about whether we can find him or he can find us.

In the parable, Jesus talks about the persistence and even the foolishness of a shepherd being so concerned for one of his lost sheep that he leaves the rest of the flock to go find the one gone astray. This shepherd doesn't say, "Boy, that's one idiotic sheep! Let him go find his own way home if he's so stupid he got himself lost." He may be thinking about it, but he loves that dumb sheep enough to go looking. That's what God does when we wander. We're busy saying "Where's God?" when it is us who have wandered. We're going looking in all sorts of ridiculous places when he is not only looking for us, he has already found us. We're the ones who are hiding from him, and that's just foolish.

Remember the Psalm from last week, Psalm 139? The Psalmist says "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely."

If the Lord already knows us completely, even when we do things that are contrary to his will, even when we are like the Israelites in the passage from Jeremiah, where the Lord says "my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding," even when we forget his love, God loves us and seeks us out. He knows us, and still loves us in all our flawed selves. And that's why he keeps looking for us, reaching out for us when we aren't reaching out for him. He desires to be in relationship with us. In modern language, he wants to hang out with us, to be viewed as one who loves us, not as a distant and unknowable judge. That's why he sent us Jesus, to help us know him as intimately and as concretely as he knows us.

Will we be perfect followers of Jesus? Most likely not. We will try and will occasionally fail. We will be embarrassed when we realize how imperfect we are, and will try to fail. But the God who made us loves us so much that he will not let us hide. He will insist on finding us wherever we have wandered. He draws us in and says "why did you run away? I want you here by me." He heals our broken hearts and redeems our sins. No need to feel lost. We are already found.

Amen.