

## Alle Alle In Free

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Proper 19 - Year C



"Lost and Found" - New Mexico, 2006

Photo by Tracey Lind

Do you remember watching first responders struggle to rescue survivors and recover victims after the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City bombings? Do you recall waiting to see who was dug out alive in earthquakes, rescued by boats during hurricanes and flooding, and driven

out in pickup trucks through fires across the globe? Did you fight back tears as a young airman shot down in Bosnia told his story of hiding in the woods hoping for rescue, when a young Rwandan woman recounted living in a bathroom for three months waiting for the genocide to end, as thousands stampeded for the airport in Baghdad last summer, or as hundreds of civilians walked out of a steel plant in Mariupol, Ukraine? Did you hold your breath as emergency workers struggled to find and free a Texas toddler who had fallen down a narrow pipe in the ground while playing in her backyard, as thirty-three Chilean miners emerged after seventeen days buried underground, or as twelve youngsters and their coach were rescued from a cave in Thailand?

What is it about stories of the lost and found? Why are we drawn so powerfully to them, like magnets? Perhaps, the answer is simply that we are all afraid of being lost or losing someone we love. And if being lost is one of our deepest fears, then being found is probably one of our innermost joys.

Truth be told, most of us roam around life, lost and hoping to be found. Much of the time, we can and do hide it well. But somewhere deep down inside each of us, there is a lost and vulnerable child who wants to curl up into a ball and cry for Mommy or Daddy.

Jesus knew it well when he used the image of the lost and found to help us understand the nature of God's personality. That's why many scholars say that the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel narrative is "the gospel within the gospel," the essence of the good news that Jesus came to proclaim.

Jesus was accused by some religious authorities of eating, drinking, and hanging out with sinners, with those who were known as "The People of the Land," or in today's nomenclature, "Street People." In response to this accusation, Jesus told them three parables: one about a lost sheep, another about a lost coin, and a third about a lost son. In each story, Jesus painted a portrait of God as a caring and compassionate seeker and lover of lost souls.

God, according to Jesus, is like a shepherd willing to leave a flock of ninety-nine sheep and walk for miles over rough and rugged terrain to find one lost lamb, who by this time is lying on the ground and refusing to budge, thus forcing his master to pick up the dumb and frightened animal and carry it home on his shoulders. When the relieved, exuberant and undoubtedly exhausted shepherd returns home, he places the lamb in the living room and invites all of his friends to celebrate his joy in finding that which was lost. God is as glad when a sinner or outcast is brought home as a shepherd when a stray sheep is rescued.

God, according to Jesus, is like a woman who searches high and low, sweeping the dirt floor of her dimly lit home, looking for a single lost coin, which either out of necessity to buy food and keep her family alive, or for sentimental reasons, because it is part of her humble yet precious marriage necklace. Most of us know the immeasurable worth of our wedding rings, even if they came from the five-and-dime store. God and all the angels are as glad when one sinner repents or one outcast is claimed as the poor woman when she finds her lost coin.

Finally, God, according to Jesus, is like a parent who rejoices and throws a huge party when a lost and prodigal child returns home, even after abandoning the family business and squandering his inheritance. If only we could all have and be such loving and accepting parents.

God takes great joy in searching for and finding lost human beings and is so very happy when one of us returns home after a journey far away. God cares so much about us - even willing to search for us when we are lost. And if this is not good news – I don't know what good news is!

However, sometimes it's hard to come home, even and maybe most especially, to God's house. I liken church to the gym, the swimming pool or the yoga studio. If we get out of the habit of exercise, it's really hard to return. It's tough to walk through those doors, show a membership card that has accumulated dust in one's wallet, pass by a mirror in our yoga pants, gym clothes or bathing suit, get out of breath after only ten minutes of running on the treadmill, collapse after ten seconds of plank, or set the weight machine at its lowest level - all in the presence of a buff, young trainer or yoga teacher who calls you by name says with a big smile, "Welcome back! We haven't seen you in a while. We've missed you." I don't know about you, but I feel a fierce combination of embarrassment, shame, intimidation, and general angst. So I stay away, and after a few months, in the words of old King James, my locker "stinketh," my body "spreadeth," and my spirit "shrinketh." The longer I stay away, the more I need it, and yet, the harder it is to return.

The same thing happens to folks with worship and meditation. When we fall out of the habit of going to church or sitting on one's prayer or meditation mat, it gets harder and harder to get back in the habit. So goes the vicious cycle of physical fitness and spirituality.

One of my favorite games and spiritual metaphors is Hide-and-Go-Seek. When I was a kid, I played Hide-and-Go-Seek almost every summer evening with the twenty or thirty kids in my neighborhood. I was great at Hide-and-Go-Seek. I knew how to hide really well, so I rarely got caught. But one night, I couldn't come out of hiding and get to home base without getting snagged. So, I waited and waited; and as the night sky darkened, I fell asleep in my hiding place. Eventually, I woke up and realized the game was over. I had hidden so well that my friends had stopped looking for me and had gone home for the night. Walking home alone in the dark, I wondered what it would be like to be really lost and have people give up on me. It didn't make me feel too good. But when I opened the kitchen door and saw the look on my mother's face, I felt relieved and loved - in spite of getting a scolding.

I guess that's why I'm inclined to search for the lost and bring them back to the fold. As a pastor, I'm always asking: "Who is missing in action, and who will go find them." As a friend, I call or email those whom I've not heard from in a while.

Sometimes, when I call or run into somebody I've not seen in a while, I'll say: "How have you been and where have you been?" It's not that I want anybody to feel guilty. It's just that I want them to know that they are missed and remembered.

Once in a while I've lost touch and someone says: "Didn't you miss me?" When this happens, I feel bad. But I wonder, why were they hiding so well; why didn't they give me that new phone number when it was changed; why didn't they let us know that they moved; why didn't they return the message I left; or why didn't they tell me about their upcoming surgery, their job loss, the death in their family, or their divorce? Did they want to be found? Or did they need to be lost for a while? Hide-and-go-seek is not just a children's game; adults can play it really well.

For nearly twenty years, I would play Hide-and-Go-Seek, with the children of my cathedral on Shrove Tuesday. Like many traditions, this one began without much thought. We were in the midst of our annual Mardi Gras Party. Pancakes and sausages were being served in Cathedral Hall to the accompaniment of a DixieLand Jazz Band. Our youngest children were making peace banners and paper doves on the stage, and adults were engaged in lively conversations around the room. Walking through the promenade, a parishioner asked me: "Is it all right for kids to be in the cathedral tonight?" I agreed to investigate the situation.

I walked into the cathedral and found a group of young boys playing Hide-and-Go-Seek in the shadows of the nave. The pulpit was the countdown location; and the altar, decorated with Mardi Gras beads and paper peace doves, had been designated home base. "Now, this is my idea of church," I thought, and before I knew it, I was up on my feet to join the game of Hide-and-Go-Seek. A younger boy squealed with delight: "Look, Dean Tracey is playing. Get her." The next thing I knew I was "It" – up in the pulpit counting to ten and then running through the darkened nave chasing after an eleven-year-old. A few minutes later, parents began to come in search of their children. One-by-one, they too joined the game. Eventually, there were about ten kids and five adults playing Hide and Go Seek in holy space on the night before Ash Wednesday.

Later that evening, I remembered the game's homecoming cry, "Allee, allee in free," short for "All ye, all ye, outs in free," which in old English means, "All who are outside come in for free." I thought to myself, this is what the church is all about. In fact, this is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. All who, for whatever reason, find themselves lost and alone, perhaps on the outside, the margins, or even the edge, are invited to come to a place of safety, a place we can call home.

For the next seventeen years, we played Hide-and-Go-Seek as part of our Shrove Tuesday celebration. In doing so, our children, their parents, onlookers, young clergy, and myself were all reminded that when we cry "Allee, allee in free," we declare the amazing grace of the Gospel. My friends, is this not the portrait of a God whom you can love, a God whom you can trust, a God to whom you can turn?

And the really good news is this - with God, the game never ends. As the old hymn says, "For the love of God is broader than the measure of [the human mind], and the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind." According to Jesus, God never stops searching for us. God keeps on searching deep into the night, even when we think the game is over and everyone else has gone home.

Soon we will return to our "school year" routine. Some of us have fallen away from churches back home. Maybe it's time to walk back in the door or find a new spiritual door through which to walk.

And now, as we say farewell to one another until next summer, let me leave you with words from the poet Edwin Markham:

He drew a circle that shut me out  
Heretic, liar, a thing to flout  
But love and I had the wit to win  
We drew a circle that took him in.

I hope you will continue to draw big circles of love with your life and your heart. For in doing so, you will be a blessing and you will be blessed.



"Take me Home" - Christ Church Cathedral, New Orleans 2005  
Photo by Tracey Lind

