

DETERMINED TO FIND US

Have you ever lost anything important?

Car keys seem to be a very common item to lose. And they're pretty important. Try driving your car without them. How many times have you or a spouse or family member or a friend said, "Now, where did I put those darned—I'm keeping it clean for the pulpit—car keys?"

I lost an umbrella a while back. Who knows where it went. I sure don't. An umbrella might not be a very important item, but it was a pretty nice one. There's a very good chance that it's still being used today to keep someone else dry when they venture out into the rain.

Sometimes we lose things that are even more significant than car keys and umbrellas. I remember one time when I misplaced my wallet. Among other things, it contained three credit cards and my debit card with the pin number written on a little slip of paper. I know, I know. Keeping a debit card and the pin number together in the same wallet isn't a very bright thing to do. It's sort of like having a safe in your house where you keep a significant amount of money and all your important papers, and taping the combination on it.

Anyway, I remember searching and searching for my wallet without success, and as I continued to look I felt all kinds of different emotions—frustration, anxiety, confusion, fear, anger—until I finally tracked it down.

Once (this happened quite a few years ago) I even lost myself! It's true! Back in the 70s, a friend and I purchased tickets to a Red Sox-Yankees game. It was a lot easier and much less expensive to get tickets to a game back then. I'd never driven to Fenway Park before, but there's a first time for everything, including the heart-pounding experience of driving in downtown Boston. Getting there wasn't a problem.

But, driving home from the game, which the Red Sox lost, I took a wrong turn somewhere and got lost. This was before the advent of GPS's. I saw towns in Massachusetts I'd never even heard of before. My friend and I had no idea where we were, or if or when we were ever going to get back to Maine. I tell you, when I finally did arrive home, I wanted to kiss the ground!

When you lose something, if you really want to find it, persistence in

looking for it helps. If you keep looking, you might well succeed in finding the thing you lost. For example, I was persistent in finding my way home as I drove around Massachusetts, looking for road signs or any clue as to which way I should go. And when I lost my wallet, I continued to look for it, to trace my steps and think about the last time I remembered seeing it, until I finally discovered where it was. I wasn't so lucky with my umbrella. But I confess that I wasn't as persistent and determined in looking for it as I was for my wallet—because it wasn't as valuable as the contents of my wallet were.

Interestingly, it seems that God sometimes loses things too, like we do. Not car keys or wallets or umbrellas, of course. God loses people. Human beings. Like us. It can happen. God just looks around, and we're gone. It's not that God misplaces us; it's that we misplace ourselves.

You see, God doesn't put a fence around us to keep us penned up. We autonomous human beings wouldn't stand for that, anyway. We're too independent, too determined to go our own way and do our own thing. We want—and God has given us—the freedom to wander and roam around, to take in all the scenery of God's creation and enjoy the green pastures of life in God's beautiful world. And sometimes, like when I was driving home from Fenway Park that night after a disappointing Red Sox loss, we can get lost.

Fortunately, when we do, God comes looking for us. That's what the two parables of Jesus we read this morning reveal to us: they describe a God who loses things—human being-things—and goes to extreme efforts to retrieve them and bring them back home. First, there's the parable of the lost sheep. A shepherd had one hundred sheep, and one of them strayed and got itself lost. So what did the shepherd do? He left the ninety-nine that weren't lost to go look for the one that was lost.

I'm not sure how wise a move that was. Yes, he did find his lost sheep, and that's good; but for all we know, when he returned with it he discovered that the other ninety-nine sheep in his flock had wandered off or were eaten by predators, and now they were gone. At the very least it was a pretty high-act move on the shepherd's part, leaving all his other sheep behind to look for the one lost one. But Jesus was trying to make the point that the God who looks for the lost sheep of his human flock is willing to go to extreme lengths to find and get back what He deeply loves and cares about.

Then we read about a woman who lost a coin. Her lost coin was worth about a day's wage back then. That's not an insignificant sum of money, but it's not a fortune, either. Still, the woman really wanted to find her coin. She wanted to find it so badly that she pulled out the Hoover vacuum and went through the

whole house with it.

The point of her story is that the coin she had lost was somewhere in her house, and she would do anything she could to find it! Like I said, God is determined; God is very persistent and thorough in the effort to find what is lost and belongs to Him—like the woman who swept and swept until she found her lost coin and, as an added benefit, ended up with a very clean house to boot!

Jesus' parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin have an uplifting, happy ending. Both the shepherd and the woman found what they had lost, and they were so overjoyed that they couldn't contain themselves. "Rejoice with me!" they both said. "I found my sheep that had wandered off. I found the coin that I had lost!" Do you suppose God reacts like that when God finds those who were lost to Him? Does God get all excited and ecstatic when we come back? Is that what Jesus was telling us through this parable?

I think it is one of the things Jesus was trying to get across in his story. Ponder that for a moment, and think about what that says about our God. Think about how badly God misses us when we're lost to Him, and how God loves us so much that God is willing to go to such great lengths and pull out all the stops to get us back. And then God throws a party upon our return!

If you're thinking right now that, Nah, God wouldn't miss me—and there are people who feel that way; I know because I've talked with some of them—if you think that God could care less if you're not around, and God isn't bothered that the seat at the table He prepared especially for you is empty, think again.

If you consider yourself lost to God, I promise that God is looking for you right now. That's good news. And even more good news is that God will continue the search until He finds you. And when God does find you, God and the angels in heaven will celebrate! There will be joy in heaven at your return to the fold.

Another amazing thing about our God who loses things is that, no matter how long the one who is missing is gone, God will continue to look. God hunts and searches and pursues us tenaciously, anywhere and everywhere, for as long as it takes. God is persistent and never gives up the hope of finding those who are lost, even if it takes a lifetime. And you know how long a lifetime lasts for God.

I came across a wonderful true story recently. It took place in Wales, which is part of the United Kingdom. It concerns two people, a man named David and a woman named Rachel. David and Rachel were life-long neighbors who lived side-by-side in adjacent houses. They were also very much in love with each other. When David and Rachel were teenagers, they became engaged; but they had a lover's quarrel that they couldn't get past, so they broke off their

relationship and their engagement.

It didn't take long before David's heart told him that he and Rachel truly belonged together. So, every week after their break-up, David wrote a love letter to Rachel, professing his deep affection for her and apologizing for his part in their quarrel. And he would take the letter, walk over to Rachel's house and slip it under her front door.

David did that every week for forty-two years! Can you imagine the determination and desire he must have had in order to continue doing that for over four decades? He truly wanted Rachel back in his life.

Well, one day, with his weekly love letter in his hand, David gathered up his courage and knocked on Rachel's door rather than merely slipping the letter under it. When Rachel answered the door, David proposed to her. He asked her to marry him right there on the spot. Rachel accepted, and the wedding soon followed.

David and Rachel were 74 years old when they finally married each other. God bless David for his persistence and resolve in pursuing Rachel for forty-two years; although one might wonder why in the world he didn't knock on Rachel's door a few years sooner than he did! And, to be fair, Rachel could have spoken up, as well. But my point is, this story is a wonderful analogy for how our God works. Think of God as constantly approaching those who are estranged from Him and slipping love letters under the door of their hearts, begging them to return.

Maybe at some point, if we don't respond to God's first overtures, God will take it a step further and actually knock on the door of our hearts rather than discreetly slipping a love letter under it. But why would we want to let so much precious time pass by and make God have to do that, when we could be in a loving relationship with our Creator right now?

One question that might arise at this point is, very simply: Does there ever come a point when God gives up on us; when God stops slipping those love letters under our door because He is getting no response, so God throws His hands in the air in frustration and impatience and says, "That's it. I'm done. Just let them stay lost"?

What do you think?

I believe—and this morning's two parables back me up on this—I believe it's simply not in God's nature to stop seeking the lost. It's not God's character to ever give up hope that those who are lost will one day be found and return to where they belong. It's not in God's nature to ever stop wanting us, loving us, forgiving us, looking for us, and giving God's all to us.

I believe we give up on ourselves and one another long before God will ever give up on us and on others. And that's just what we need. We need God to be in it with us for the duration, through good and bad, thick and thin, when we're right and when we're wrong. And that's exactly the kind of God we have.

It's so wonderful to know that it's God's job, and it's God's pleasure, to not give up on us; to pursue us tirelessly when we're lost; and to have unbounded determination to bring us back into the fold, even when we're just as bound and determined to stay lost.

Thank God that He doesn't give up the search for us.

Thank God for the divine persistence and determination to look and search and sweep and sweep and seek and seek, until finally we're found and brought back, and heaven can rejoice and celebrate our homecoming.

Yes, thanks be to God! Amen.