

Sermon on Luke 15:1-10  
17<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, September 11, 2016  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

*Lost and Found; Joy and Despair*

I am so glad that the gospel lesson we just heard, about the joy in finding what has been lost, was not read last Sunday. Do you know why? Last Sunday we had just learned how the man who abducted Jacob Wetterling 27 years ago had admitted to the court that he had been the one, and led authorities to the place where he had buried and hid Jacob's body. A few days later we heard the gruesome, heart-wrenching details of how he had done it, at a press conference that followed his court appearance. Jacob had been lost for 27 years, but now he had been found – which although it brought closure to his family, finding Jacob brought no joy at all. We heard his mother Patty Wetterling tell us how they now had to deal with the grief in knowing that their lost son, although he had at last been found, was dead – and had been for all these years. In the press conference she said, *“I want to say ‘Jacob, I’m so sorry.’ It’s so painful to know his last hours....last minutes...Our hearts are hurting. For us Jacob was alive until we found him.”*

For the Wetterlings, and for all of us, this conclusion to 27 years of searching the state for clues brought no satisfaction or joy at all. If there were to be any consolation, it was that they had never given up their hope in finding Jacob alive, and kept that hope alive for 27 long years, even when others had given up on the case. But as so many embraced them in their pain and loss last week, Patty Wetterling said, *“Our family is drawing strength from all your love and support. We’re struggling with words at this time. Thank you for your hope.”*

Contrast this with today's gospel: a collection of two brief parables comparing the joy we humans feel at finding lost valuable possessions with the “joy in heaven” when one sinner repents and comes home to God. It's all a preparation for the great parable of the Lost Son (or the Two Lost Sons and the Welcoming Father) which follows. The focus is on the great joy God has when we return after running away or just being lost. Luke describes this joy in human terms that we can all understand, with the example of finding a lost sheep and a lost coin. In the first, a shepherd leaves 99 sheep to search for one that was lost, and doesn't stop looking until he finds it. It's a familiar image, which we have pictured in stained glass upstairs in our church sanctuary, in which Jesus is the “Good Shepherd”, cradling that one sheep who was found, along with the rest of the flock which follows behind.

The other parable is about a woman who has ten silver coins, a small fortune, in her house. It was probably her life's savings. But she lost one coin, and searched the house frantically for it, sweeping the floors, looking under the furniture on her hands and knees. Wouldn't you? We've all been there, right? When she finally found the coin, she called her friends and neighbors over to help celebrate with her. And so Jesus shares the point, how *"there is joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents.."*

You see, it's a comparison that Jesus is making, between the joy we humans feel when we find what we have lost, with the joy God has when God finds us. The feeling of joy is what we can relate to – and so it's an entry point for us to understand the joy of God.

But what we often overlook is how diligently and patiently God seeks us out, even when we go in the opposite direction, running away from our Lord. This is the other message of the parable. God will always look for us, no matter where or how far we wander or run. Not to control us, or pull us back into the confines of the Church, but to bring us home, to the place of true safety, in the loving arms of God, our Creator, our Father and our Mother. For our Lord is always seeking to keep in relationship with us, as a parent to a child, throughout our growing pains, our leave-taking and our estrangement. For even when we may abandon God, our Lord will never abandon us. Or even when we might be stolen away, God is always seeking us out, and waiting for us to return. Much like the Wetterlings, as they watched and waited for their beloved Jacob, with their porch light always lit.

Sometimes these stories of "lost and found" have a happier ending, such as when a lost child is actually discovered safe and sound. I remember how I preached on this passage six years ago, and prepared the sermon. One day the week before, I was driving on Interstate 94 heading west, and I noticed on the electronic sign over the freeway the large words *AMBER ALERT*. It was an alert that a child had been abducted, and a description of the missing child and a vehicle were on that sign. Ironically, it was because of the abduction of Jacob Wetterling that there was even a law creating the "amber alert" process – as Patty Wetterling and others worked diligently for such alerts to go out as soon as possible when a child was reported missing. Well, in 2010 this amber alert worked, and the child was soon found, to the great joy and relief of her mother and family. The story was announced on the evening news, and I believe that there was great joy in heaven, in the presence of the angels, that the lost had been found, safe and sound!

In this fallen world, children, women, and men are often lost. Sometimes there are happy endings, but sometimes the story ends in tragedy, other times we see no resolution at all – and the lost remain missing.

Today our nation observes the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragic destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. We know how many people

died that day – over 3,000 total, whose names are carved into the memorials in New York City, at the Pentagon, and in that field in rural Pennsylvania where one of the planes went down. There are many stories of courageous persons who guided those lost in the smoke of the Twin Towers down the many steps to safety. And there were those, like equities trader Wells Crowther, who kept going back in to lead more people out. Many of the lost were found, and led to safety that day – and many more who did not make it out, and were lost forever. Do you remember the frantic searching for survivors and the deceased in the days and nights after 9-11? For weeks there were photos of loved ones placed on bulletin boards in New York City and New Jersey, as relatives and friends hoped against hope that someone may have seen or heard of what happened to them. Eventually many were given up as lost, with no trace of them to be found. There was no joy, only mourning for their loss. Today there is a memorial at each of the sites, where people can stop to remember their loved ones.

One symbol that was lost, however, was recently found. There was a flag raised by firefighters on September 11th, as a show of unity, defiance and strength in the midst of the destruction and rubble. In a few days that flag disappeared. People thought it was lost forever. But just this year, the flag was discovered – it had been given to some other firefighter as a gift, who had kept it in his home in another state. It miraculously turned up, and has now been returned by that person, and placed in the memorial to the fallen in New York City. The lost had been found – only a flag, perhaps – but a symbol of so many souls who were lost that day, now at peace.

Today perhaps is a mixed message of joy and sadness, for those who are found and those who are lost. It's a recognition that sometimes life is like a pendulum, where we go back and forth from being lost and alone, or being found and in relationship with God and others. Experiencing the ups and downs of life, being inside or out, at times feeling like we belong, or other times feeling like we don't. I think we all have felt "lost" at times – lost and confused, not knowing where we are. I hope there are also times when you and I have felt the comfort of being "home" – with family, with God, or with the Body of Christ. I hope that there are times that you have experienced the "joy" of feeling that you do belong, and remember how that feels – because often that feeling of "joy" doesn't last.

Today we have a glimpse at the true heart of God – the joy of our Lord when we who are lost return home to our God. It's a new view of God, perhaps, from those who consider the Almighty to be some kind of judge, who decides who is "in" and who is "out", who is condemned and who is set free. A vengeful judge who enforces the rules that we humans are unable to live by or abide! But these parables told by Jesus tell a whole new story about God and about us. Instead of God the enforcer, Jesus tells of a loving Father who seeks us out when you and I

are lost, and welcomes us home! Like a parent who rejoices when a lost child is found. Like a mother who searches for years – for 27 years as Patty Wetterling did – and never gives up hope seeking and waiting for her beloved who has been lost. Like the man who runs back into the burning tower to help guide more of the lost to safety. And then rejoices when one of us comes home safe.

That is what our God is like. That is the situation you and I are in – continually getting lost, unable to find our own way home. But God is looking for you, and God has open arms to welcome you back. So open your eyes and ears to your loving Father who is calling for you, who sent God's only Son Jesus to seek you out, who died for you so that you can come home, and rose again to give you and me and all the world life forever. There is no joy for any of us when any child of God remains lost. But there is great joy in heaven when you, or me, or any child of this earth hears the voice of the Savior, and comes home. Amen.