

“Lost, But Then Found”
Luke 15:1-10
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 16, 2007

“By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around with Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religious scholars were not pleased, not pleased at all. They growled, ‘He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.’” (Luke 15:1-2, The Message)

It was a fairly typical group of United Methodists. Some had been raised in traditional, middle class, suburban churches, while others had come from small country churches that had looked and operated the same for decades. All of the members of that group were fine, upstanding citizens. Each one of them had been taught to put God, country, and their families before everything else in life, a task that they took very, very seriously. They attached a real importance to doing what they thought was the right thing to do. And ever since their youngest days their parents and Sunday School teachers had taught them that they “were known by the company they keep,” advice that seemed sound, logical, and even somewhat biblical. After all, the Psalmist did warn God’s people to not “take the path that sinner’s tread;” while the Book of Proverbs proclaimed that despite the sinners’ enticement, the faithful should not follow. The prophet Isaiah had even warned Israel to “touch no unclean thing!” Besides, they were also taught that when everything else was lost, all they would have left would be their good name. So don’t sully it. And as far as they knew, none of them had done that. Their names were still good, respected names, not only among their circle of friends, but throughout the church and community as well. Oh, these were good people; those with whom even your parents would be glad to have you associate.

Now it was this group of very typical United Methodists who, one Saturday evening, decided to head down to the Old Market and eat dinner at the Spaghetti Works. They have a great salad bar down there, don’t they? Anyway, as they were walking down one of the sidewalks, sidewalks that my grandfather told me he once helped build, they passed an establishment that catered to a rather different element—a “back-in-the-day” Homer’s kind of crowd, if you know what I mean. It was a tattoo and body-piercing

parlor. This group of typical United Methodists couldn't resist looking into its large storefront window, and when they did they saw a group of about 20 people sitting in a circle. They didn't look like any United Methodist that they ever knew, or even any Lutheran for that matter! These were men and women who had decorated themselves with all kinds of so-called body art. Some had tattoos covering their arms and torsos, while others had piercings in just about anyplace that could be pierced. Some had both tattoos and piercings, creating a most unusual look—especially the fellow who had rings in his ear lobes, not dangling from each lobe, mind you, but actually in his ear lobes, as well as a spike through his septum and a peg protruding from his tongue. The whole group sort of looked like what you might see in National Geographic—sort of. Everyone there was engaged in rather animated conversation while sharing coffee and bagels, and in the middle of their circle sat someone who looked just like Jesus. Wait a minute, he just didn't look just like Jesus, that fellow was Jesus. He looked just like that picture back in their narthex, except that he was wearing an old “Tommy Lee Goes to College” tee shirt, distressed denims, and worn-out Nikes rather than the usual white robe and sandals. And he was sitting among all of those tattooed and body pierced people sipping a cup of coffee! How in the world did he find his way to an Old Market tattoo parlor, they wondered? How could he associate with such a disreputable group? And why in the name of all that is holy would he be sharing coffee with them and laughing?

While they were all on the sidewalk discussing what they thought to be a rather disturbing situation, Jesus looked out the window and must have realized what was going on. So he rose from the circle and made his way toward the front door. Upon opening it, he didn't even bother to say hello. Instead, he simply looked at that rather typical group of United Methodists and said the following:

What man, having realized he does not have his old Wilson steel-shafted pitching wedge with him, does not leave his bag of the finest Callaway drivers, fairway woods and irons unattended on the putting green and race back to the car to search frantically through the trunk and back seat until he finally finds it? And when he does, he props it up on his shoulder and strolls back to the course. When he gets to the putting green, he calls

out to all around, "Rejoice with me and let's head over to the clubhouse, boys, for I have found my wedge that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will more joy in heaven over one so-called 'bad person' who repents than a whole golf bag full of so-called good people who need no repentance.

While the group just sort of stood there bewildered and confused, Jesus looked at them and continued: *Or what woman, having a dozen Titleist V1xs in her bag, if she loses a scarred K-Mart discount ball in the rough, does not take a club and search through every single clump of grass until she finds it? And then when she has found it, she looks back at those in her group and all of those foursomes backed up on the tee and yells, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the ball I sliced into the rough!" Just so I tell you, there is a party going on in heaven when one who was lost in the rough places of life is finally found.*

That typical group of United Methodists was troubled by what Jesus had to say. Just having completed their annual United Methodist Men and Inquisitive Spouses Four Person Scramble, they knew that no one in their right mind would ever do either of those things. Who cares about finding old steel shaft clubs or K-Mart specials? That would be just about as crazy as leaving a healthy herd of 99 Black Angus cattle behind to search for one missing calf. This was happening in Nebraska, remember. And yet, by the look in Jesus' eyes, and by the way that he was glancing back through the window of that tattoo parlor, they could tell that there was probably something they were missing. Hey, it may be true that we United Methodists are simply Presbyterians without an education, but we're not stupid. That group of fellow Wesleyans out on the sidewalk seemed to sense that Jesus wanted them to understand something or another about finding lost things. And they had heard enough children's sermons during worship to know that the answers to stories like they were hearing always seemed to be either "God" or "Jesus." So they reluctantly turned their attention to him once more as he began to tell them another story. It went like this:

A girl grows up on an apple orchard just outside Nebraska City.¹ Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the style of her clothes. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. “I hate you!” she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She thought first about going to Omaha, but that was too obvious. So was Lincoln. She had visited Kansas City only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group for a day at Worlds of Fun and to watch the Royals play. Because the newspaper in Nebraska City reports in lurid detail the gangs, the drugs, and the violence in just about all the big cities in the Midwest, she concludes that is probably the last place her parents will try to look for her. California, maybe, or Florida, but not Kansas City.

Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she’s ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch and some new clothes, and arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she’s ever felt before. It doesn’t take long for her to figure out that she was right all along: her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car—she calls him “Boss”—teaches her a few things men like. Since she’s underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse, and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline, “Have you seen this child?” But by now she has blond hair, and with all the make-up, tattoos, and body-piercing she wears, nobody would mistake

¹ While the names of the locations have been changed, this story comes from Philip Yancy’s What So Amazing about Grace, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997, P.49-51

her for a child. Besides, most of her friends are runaways, and nobody squeals in Kansas City.

After a year the first sallow signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. “These days, we can’t mess around,” he growls, and before she knows it she is out on the street without a penny to her name. She still turns a couple of tricks a night, but they don’t pay much, and all the money goes to support her habit. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on the metal grates outside the big department stores. “Sleeping” is the wrong word—a teenage girl at night in downtown Kansas City can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of the sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she’s hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers piled atop her coat. At that moment something jolts a synapse of memory and a single image fills her mind: of May in Nebraska City, when a million apple trees all bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

“God, why did I leave?” she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. “My dog at home eats better than I do now.” She’s sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world that she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, “Dad, Mom, it’s me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I’m catching a bus up your way, and it’ll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you’re not there, well, I guess I’ll just stay on the bus and keep heading north. Bye.”

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Kansas City and Nebraska City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead a long time ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between the worries and the speech that she is preparing for her father. "Dad, I'm sorry. I know I was wrong. It's not your fault; it's all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?" She whispers the words over and over again, hoping the other passengers aren't listening, and realizing that her throat is tightening each time she rehearses them. She hasn't apologized to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with the lights on ever since leaving Leavenworth, and the weather turned bad somewhere around Falls City. Tiny snowflakes hit the pavement that has been rubbed worn by tens of thousands of tires, and the asphalt steams. She's forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A deer darts across the road and the bus swerves. Ever so often she sees a billboard announcing Arbor Lodge or the Henry Doorly Zoo up in Omaha. The bus darts past a sign posting the mileage to Nebraska City. "Oh, God," she sighs.

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here." Fifteen minutes to make up for years of mistakes. Fifteen minutes to decide her life. It seems so unfair. She checks herself in a compact mirror. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips, and wonders if her parents will notice...wonders if they've even bothered to come.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousands of scenes that have played out in her mind prepares her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Nebraska City, Nebraska, stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great-aunts and cousins and a grandmother and a

great-grandmother to boot. They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noisemakers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome Home."

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. With his party hat cocked ridiculously to one side and a Hawaiian lei draped about his neck, he rushes to her side. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins her memorized speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know..."

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. There's a banquet's waiting for you at home."

That group of typical United Methodists just sort of stood there after Jesus had finished his story, frozen by the words they had just heard. They really had no idea of what to do next; so they turned and looked again through the storefront window. But this time, they only saw their own reflection. And that is when Jesus looked at them with those same eyes with which he looks at all of us, and said, "How about coming in for a cup of coffee and a bagel?" As they walked through the door of that Old Market tattoo and body-piercing parlor and sat down with that group of very different looking but strangely familiar people, they looked up at Jesus and suddenly realized that they too knew the indescribable joy of coming home.

Oh, how I hope that you will come to know that joy as well.