

“Lost and Found”

Luke 19:1-10

Sermon series: Who Do You Say That I Am?

Answer: Jesus, the one who seeks

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A number of years ago, Lynna Williams wrote a short story called “Personal Testimony.”

It’s about a 12-year-old girl, the daughter of a fire-breathing, West Texas preacher, and every summer this girl is compelled by her father to go to a fundamentalist Bible camp for a couple weeks.

During the day, this camp is like most other camps for kids:
there’s hiking, sailing, softball, arts and crafts...

BUT AT NIGHT:

At night, every night there is a sweaty, come-to-Jesus revival meeting, and the unwritten rule is that EVERY camper will at some point during their stay come forward and give his or her personal testimony.

The reality, of course, is that many of these campers are just normal kids, they don’t really have personal testimonies—and that’s where our 12-year-old preacher’s daughter comes into play.

See, she’s figured out a way to make some extra money at camp—
as a GHOST WRITER for Jesus.

She fabricates personal testimonies for the other campers.

For five dollars, she wrote one for Michael,
which he delivered, tears coming down his face,
about how in his old life he used to take the Lord’s name in vain
at football games...

but now his mouth is as pure as a crystal spring.

Her most dramatic work was for Tim.

Tim recalled how his life was empty and meaningless until the near-accident...late at night, in a pick-up truck, and he was sure he was a goner until Jesus took the steering wheel and turned the vehicle away from danger....
that required a little more imagination, so she charged \$25....¹

It is, of course, a made-up story, but the paradigm is one we recognize:
Old life, new life, right?
ONCE lost, now FOUND.

The Gospel writer Luke LOVES this paradigm.

If you go back to the 15th chapter of Luke, Jesus tells three parables:

The story of the lost sheep.
The story of the lost coin.
The story of the lost (or prodigal) son.

And you may recall that Luke is also the author of the book of Acts, and in Acts, who is the main—or one of the main characters? The Apostle Paul! Who was Saul. Who once was persecuting the church, but then, by God's grace, becomes a missionary for the church.

Old life, new life, right?
Once lost, now found.

And so we have another example of this paradigm in our text.

Jesus says: "...the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

And he's talking about Zacchaeus.
A tax collector.
Don't think IRS when you hear tax collector.

Remember, tax collectors were despised people in Jesus' day.

¹ Lynna Williams, "Personal Testimony," in *Texas Bound: 19 Texas Stories*, edited by Kay Cattarulla, Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1994. I first heard reference to this story from Tom Long in a sermon he preached at the Festival of Homiletics, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, May, 2005.

Zacchaeus didn't receive his name AFTER Jesus found him.
It was always his name.

Which got me thinking...what if Luke is trying to tell us something with this name?

What if Zacchaeus was innocent all along?

What if he wasn't lining his pockets with money taken from his own people?
What if he was just an honest guy in a lousy and morally ambiguous profession, and he was making a living the best way he knew how?

"...if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

That doesn't have to be a proclamation of guilt.

It could also be the pledge of an innocent person—I've never done such a thing—defraud someone? I'll pay back four times if you find me guilty of anything like that!

So how are we supposed to hear the story of Zacchaeus?

Let's take one more look at those three parables in chapter 15.
I know we didn't read them this morning.
But you remember.

Lost sheep.

Lost coin.

Lost son.

I think...in those three parables, Luke is telling his readers that there are DIFFERENT WAYS that we can be lost.

Think about it.

How does a sheep get lost?

Just by wandering away. Not by making a series of poor decisions.

Just by being a sheep.

How does a coin get lost?
Not by some decision the coin makes.

A coin is lost when it's misplaced.
It's just a coin—an innocent coin, if I can put it that way.

I wonder if that's what we've got here with Zacchaeus.

Imagine that you are Zacchaeus, and even though you're honest, your profession has a terrible reputation. But you can't get out of what you do—you're trapped by the Romans. By the system. It's got you in its grip.

Your work is the way you put food on the table.
What does that get you?

It keeps you alive...but you're not really living.

No one accepts you.
No one likes you.
No one wants to be your friend.

You've got all the money you could ever hope for,
but money won't fill that HOLE in your heart,
the empty place that craves a community that will welcome you...

And then Jesus comes along.

You've heard about Jesus, and you really want to see Jesus, so you climb up
a tree—

think about the image there—
Zacchaeus is up a tree, apart, separated ONCE AGAIN
from the community.

And Jesus sees you and calls you and says in front of everyone else:

“Zacchaeus...I must stay at your house today.”

And when he says that, you hear the words you have been DYING to hear:
You are accepted. You are welcomed.
You are loved. You are part of God's family!

This one too is a son of Abraham! Jesus says...

And that hole in Zacchaeus's heart suddenly starts to heal.

And he no longer sees himself as lost.

He no longer FEELS lost.

He no longer IS lost...because Jesus has found him.

I wonder if that's a FOURTH WAY in Luke that a person can be lost and found.

You've got a hole in your heart...and then it starts to HEAL...

and that healing leads to JOY...

In 2016, an Oscar-nominated movie appeared, based on a true story about a boy who was lost in India.

Saroo Brierley is the boy's name.

He and his siblings were being raised by their mother, their family was very poor. He was 5 years old when he and his brother went to a train station to scavenge for coins near their home.

Saroo fell asleep on a bench at the train station, and his brother left Saroo to look around. When Saroo woke up, he did not see his brother. So he panicked. He climbed aboard a train close to the bench, figuring his brother was there. His brother was NOT on the train, but Saroo realizes this too late.

The train leaves the station, and it takes 5-year-old Saroo all the way to Calcutta—almost 1000 miles from his home.

Saroo was illiterate, which meant he mispronounced the name of his hometown. And the people of Calcutta spoke a different language than Saroo, all of which meant there was no way to clearly communicate where he lived.

He was lost—through no fault of his own.

Roaming the streets.

Eventually, Saroo gets picked up and placed in an orphanage, and a couple from Australia adopt him.

Saroo spent the next 25 years of his life growing up there, going to school, to college—but he never forgets his home in India. And one day as an adult, Saroo discovers Google Earth.

Over the course of the next six years, he sets about trying to find his original home using Google Earth—imagine that. Six years...looking for a tiny village, not knowing the village's real name, in a country as huge as India...it was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

But one day, he sees something that matches his memory. The closer he looks, the more certain he is that—against all odds—he has found his Indian home.

So he travels from Australia to India.

And in the movie, the final scene shows Saroo asking around the village, being pointed in the direction of his mother's place, walking down the road—and a woman at the end of the road starts walking toward him.²

Imagine that moment.

Saroo hasn't seen his birth mother for 25 years, but now he sees her.

His mother didn't know what happened to her boy.

For a quarter century, she fears he is dead but has never given up hope—and now she sees him again, as a grown man.

Can you picture what it's like to be that mother and son at that moment?

Can you picture the hole in that mother's heart being healed?

Can you picture the JOY of what's lost...being found?

You see, it's the JOY that captures my imagination in our text for today.

² The movie referenced here is "Lion", and is based on Saroo Brierley's book *Lion: A Long Way Home*, New York: Berkley, 2013.

The joy that prompts Zacchaeus to give away HALF of what he has away.

In fact, if we go back to Luke 15 ONE MORE TIME, how do each of those parables of lost and found end?

They end in JOY!

The one who finds his lost sheep...wants to celebrate.

The woman who finds her lost coin...wants to celebrate.

The father who gets his lost son back...throws a party!

And here we have Zacchaeus, pledging to give half of his possessions to the poor!

Have you ever known that kind of JOY?

Let me get at it this way.

If there are different ways of being lost, according to Luke—

the sheep lost just by being a sheep,

the coin lost by no fault of its own,

Zacchaeus lost because his community will not see him for who he truly is, judging him by what's on the outside and what is on the inside...

All of this makes me wonder...have you ever been lost before?

It doesn't have to be because you made a mistake or poor decisions...

Maybe you were lost when a relationship failed.

Or your job disappeared.

Or your dreams were dashed.

Or a loved one is now gone, and you just can't get your bearings...

There are any number of reasons we might find ourselves lost, in this or that season of our lives.

Which is why I think the heart of the gospel is found in this text:

Jesus is the one who seeks and saves the lost.

Jesus is the one who comes to us, and says—I will never give up on YOU.

I will always run after YOU.
 No matter where you go, no matter what happens to you in your life, I will
 FIND YOU.

And I will fill that hole in your heart.

You see, I believe that being found by Jesus is the reason all of us are here
 today.

We are FOUND people...and it changes us.

It helps us to be more generous, to be more loving, to be more of the person
 whom God has called each of us to be.

I'm reminded of a story that the late preacher Fred Craddock loved to tell.

Once upon a time, there was a family out for a Sunday drive.

Suddenly, the two children in back began to shout:

“Daddy, daddy, stop the car! Stop the car! There’s a kitten back there on
 the side of the road!”

The father says:

“So there’s a kitten on the side of the road—we’re having a drive.”

“But daddy, you have to stop and pick it up!”

“I don’t have to stop and pick it up.”

“But if you don’t it will DIE!”

“We don’t have room for another animal in the house.”

“But daddy, are you just going to let it die???”

“Be QUIET, children! We’re having a pleasant drive.”

“But DADDY!”

Finally, the mother turns to her husband and says, “Dear, you’ll have to stop.”

He turns the car around and returns to the spot.
He goes out to pick up the kitten.
The poor creature is just skin and bones, sore-eyed, full of fleas.

But when he reaches down to pick it up,
with its last bit of energy, the kitten bristles,
baring tooth and claw...SSSSTTTTT!!

The kitten swipes and scratches the man.

He picks up the kitten by the loose skin at the neck.
He brings it over to the car.

When they get back to the house,
the children struggle to give the kitten a bath,
feed her about a GALLON of milk,
and then they run to their father:

“Can we let it stay in the house—just for tonight?”

“Sure, take it to my bedroom—the whole house is already an animal shelter...”

They fix a comfortable bed.
One night goes by.
Two nights go by.
Several weeks go by.

Then one day, the father walks in, feels something rub against his leg, looks down—and there is the cat.

He reaches down (carefully making sure that no one else is watching),
and when the cat sees his hand, it does not bare tooth and claw.

Instead, it arches its back to receive a caress.

Now...is this the same cat?

The same lost and frightened cat on the side of the road?

Yes, it is.

And no, it's not.

It's not the same frightened, hurt, defensive kitten that was on the side of the road.

And you know as well as I do what made the difference.

(Amen.)