

The One Who Searches
Luke 15.1-10
Sunday, September 11, 2016
Pentecost +17C
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Jesus wasn't spending enough time with the establishment, he wasn't making acknowledgements of the biggest temple donors, he disregarded the rules and made time for anyone who was eager to make time for him. We know this about Jesus. We've come at this from several directions over the summer, and yet, it bears repeating because we still don't trust that he meant what he said. We still don't trust that the Pharisees and scribes were reading the situation wrong. We're too familiar with our sin—or rather, too familiar with our idea of what we think sin is and our assumptions of what we think God thinks of us in our flawed, imperfect state.

I've been thinking about this a lot lately. I grew up in a "moderate" Baptist congregation that didn't talk much about hell. There was no finger wagging about sin or threats of "If you die tonight, do you know where you'll spend eternity?" I wasn't raised with that kind of theological anxiety. But I was raised in Alabama at the rise of the fundamentalist takeover in the Southern Baptist Convention, and you didn't have to travel too far to find someone who would gladly set the moderate Baptist pastor straight on hell and sin and assurance of salvation. As Flannery O'Connor once famously said, "while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted."

And so it is that I am still shaking off the haunt of bad theology that conflicts with the person of Jesus Christ. And these Luke 15 searching stories still open anew for me when I read of the shepherd chasing after a sheep, the woman tearing the house apart to find a coin, and the father who searches for and runs to his lost son while he is still far off. The stories tell us our own.

Maybe it's something like this:

Turner was about 3-and-a-half years old, Julia maybe nine months; exactly ten years ago, give or take a few weeks. We'd gone to the Virginia Children's Museum for a

day. As far as I can remember, the outing had gone well. I'd managed keeping up with a curious baby and active boy without tears from either, and that's when I turned to buckle the baby girl into her stroller in order to get home for afternoon quiet time. That's all the time it took, those 15 seconds or so of placing her in her baby seat, snapping the buckle around her middle, and he was gone. I remember standing beside the water table and could not find my son anywhere.

The children's museum had a large preschool play area with a half wall around it, a cave with tunnels for children to explore, a giant treehouse net that climbed up three stories to the skylights, a dinosaur to climb up one side and slide down, an enormous apple tree to pick apples in baskets and then return them to a conveyor belt. He could be anywhere. I began looking in all of those areas, and the play TV news station, the children's grocery store, the once-active, now-stationary ambulance, arts and crafts room. Nowhere. In just seconds, he'd vanished.

I don't know how much time actually passed, but I began to pick up my pace. I asked other parents, no help. I described his thick head of curly, brown hair and the striped shirt he was wearing. No one had seen him. I finally asked the museum staff to help me, and several of us began moving quickly through the space, room by room, station by station, until one of the staff found him in the absolute farthest corner from where I'd left him, on a stage, behind a curtain, patiently trying on all of the dress-up clothes to perform a one-kid show before a vacant audience. Maybe it was 2 or 3 or 5 minutes before we found him. I really can't tell you. But the tears were only mine as I ran to him in relief and scooped him up to take him home. He never knew he was lost. He never knew I was searching for him. He'd simply gone exploring and had one more idea to create and tinker before he was ready to leave. All the while he knew what he was doing and trusted that I was somewhere close by waiting for him.

Sometimes searching looks like this:

On this 15th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, I have seen numerous retellings of brave men and women like Welles Crowther, a 24-year-old equities trader and Boston College graduate with training as a volunteer firefighter. He raced up and down flights of stairs leading some 20 people to safety. One woman reports Crowther personally carried her down 17 flights of stairs, saving her life.

Ultimately, one of his return trips into the burning building was his last. Like me, he would be 39-years-old now. Karoline Lewis reminds us, "sometimes you are the one who searches and sometimes you are the one who is found."¹

Perhaps our hesitation to search at all is like the image Rabbi Maggie Wenig paints in her sermon "God is a Woman and She is Growing Older":

God is a woman and she is growing older. She moves more slowly now. She cannot stand erect. Her face is lined. Her voice is scratchy. Sometimes she has to strain to hear. God is a woman and she is growing older; yet, she remembers everything.

On Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the day on which she gave us birth, God sits down at her kitchen table, opens the Book of Memories, and begins turning the pages; and God remembers.

"There, there is the world when it was new and my children when they were young." As she turns each page she smiles, seeing before her, like so many dolls in a department store window, all the beautiful colors of our skin, all the varied shapes and sizes of our bodies. She marvels at our accomplishments: the music we have written, the gardens we have planted, the stories we have told, the ideas we have spun.

There pasted into the pages of her book are all the cards we have ever sent to her when we did not bother to visit. She notices our signatures scrawled beneath the printed words someone else has composed.

God is home, turning the pages of her book. "Come home," she wants to say to us, "Come home." But she won't call. For she is afraid that we will say, "No." She can anticipate the conversation: "We are so busy. We'd love to see you but we just can't come. Too much to do."

Even if we don't realize it, God knows that our busy-ness is just an excuse. She knows that we avoid returning to her because we don't want to look into her

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4708>

age-worn face. It is hard for us to face a god who disappointed our childhood expectations: She did not give us everything we wanted. She did not make us triumphant in battle, successful in business and invincible to pain. We avoid going home to protect ourselves from our disappointment and to protect her. We don't want her to see the disappointment in our eyes. Yet, God knows that it is there and she would have us come home anyway.

What if we did? What if we did go home and visit God? What might it be like? God would usher us into her kitchen, seat us at her table and pour two cups of tea. She has been alone so long that there is much she wants to say. But we barely allow her to get a word in edgewise, for we are afraid of what she might say and we are afraid of silence. So we fill an hour with our chatter, words, words, so many words. Until, finally, she touches her finger to her lips and says, "Shh. Sha. Be still."

Then she pushes back her chair and says, "Let me have a good look at you." And she looks. And in a single glance, God sees us as both newly born and dying: coughing and crying and laughing and dancing, as a young child afraid of the road ahead and as an old person looking back wondering where the years went. In a single glance she sees our birth and our death and all the years in between.

When she is finished looking at us, God might say, "So tell me, how *are* you?" Now we are afraid to open our mouths and tell her everything she already knows: whom we love; where we hurt; what we have broken or lost; what we wanted to be when we grew up.

So we change the subject. "Remember the time when... "

"Yes, I remember," she says. Suddenly we are both talking at the same time; saying all the things the greeting cards never said:

"I'm sorry that I..."

"That's alright, I forgive you."

"I didn't mean to..."

"I know that. I do."

We look away. "I never felt I could live up to your expectations."

"I always believed you could do anything," she answers.

“What about your future?” she asks us. We do not want to face our future. God hears our reluctance, and she understands. We are growing older as God is growing older. How much like her we have become.

God holds our face in her two hands and whispers, “Do not be afraid, I will be faithful to the promise I made to you when you were young. I will be with you. Even to your old age I will be with you. When you are grey headed still I will hold you. I gave birth to you, I carried you. I will hold you still. Grow old along with me....”

Our fear of the future is tempered now by curiosity. The universe is infinite. Unlimited possibilities are arrayed before us still. We can awaken each morning to wonder: What shall I learn today? What can I create today? What will I notice that I have never seen before?

It has been a good visit. Before we leave, it is our turn to take a good look at God. The face which time has marked looks not frail to us now—but wise. For we understand that God knows those things only the passage of time can teach: that one can survive the loss of a love; that one can feel secure even in the midst of an ever changing world; that there is dignity in being alive even when every bone aches. God’s movements seem not slow to us—but strong and intent, unlike our own. For we are too busy to see beneath the surface. We speak too rapidly to truly listen, and we move too quickly to feel what we touch. We form opinions too fast to judge honestly. While God, God moves slowly and with intention. God sees everything there is to see, understands everything God hears, and touches all that lives.

God would prefer that we come home. She is waiting for us, ever patiently until we are ready. God will not sleep. She will leave the door open and the candles burning waiting patiently for our return.

Jesus assures us that God is searching after us just as we are searching after God, and he promises there is something holy in our searching. Forget the rules and the perfection and the propriety. You don't have to get this right and come at it in just the right way. Keep trying! Show up! Notice! Give it a shot! As Liz Gilbert says, "Look for God like a man with his head on fire looks for water."²

The Pharisees and the scribes essentially accused Jesus of wasting his time on the wrong things and with the wrong people. In response to being chastised for spending too much time with the new folks and the wrong folks and the folks who don't have anything to give in return, Jesus said, "These people I'm eating with and 'wasting' all of my time with are searchers. They're chasing after something true. They've gotten a glimpse that their lives can be better and fuller. They're showing up and being honest.

That's more than I can say for you, the ones who think you've arrived. The ones afraid to stare yourself in a mirror. The ones terrified by your secret darkness and your private dreams. The ones who wonder if anyone will love you if they knew your innermost secrets. This search is for everyone. You aren't too far gone, and you haven't arrived yet. You aren't too far off in sin, and you haven't figured out all there is to life and God and love and beauty.

We are continually in need of searching for each other and bringing each other along on this quest. God searches with us. We are actively pursuing each other. This is time well spent. 'Unlimited possibilities are arrayed before us still. We can awaken each morning to wonder: What shall I learn today? What can I create today? What will I notice that I have never seen before?'

Won't you join us? Won't you join me? I guarantee the angels will cheer for you in delight when you return to this searching path and take that first, honest step. What are you waiting for?"

² Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*