



'Remembering the Lost'

Lectionary 24 – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

8:30 & 10:45 am, September 11, 2016

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Psalm 51:1-10](#); [1 Timothy 1:12-17](#); [Luke 15:1-10](#)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

My mother gave it to me a couple years ago. It is a gold wedding band, simple and unadorned, save for some etching on the inside. It reads: **HC JB 8/15/95**.

This is the wedding band of my great-grandmother. She was the "HC"—Hilma Carlson. "JB" was my great-grandfather, John Burglund. The date marks their engagement: August 15, 1895. They were married one year later, and this is the ring my great-grandmother wore.

Somewhere in the early 1900's, they moved up on a hill overlooking Johnsonburg, Pennsylvania. They had 13 acres of land, and farmed it with all kinds of growing things. Like most farmers in Johnsonburg, my great-grandfather also worked in the town's paper mill when the day's farming chores were over.

And it was in that paper mill in 1908 that my great-grandfather Burglund was killed in an accident—a heavy cart designed for moving logs pinning him against a wall.

My great-grandmother, in some ways, was grateful for the farm on the hill. It was a tremendous amount of work, tilling the soil and caring for the cows and chickens. But it was a way to survive as a single parent raising four children, including the boy who would become my grandfather.

At some point after 1908—our family doesn't know exactly when—my great-grandmother lost this ring. I don't know that she realized at first it was lost while she plowed the fields. Perhaps she thought she laid it down in the kitchen and it was knocked away onto the floor. Perhaps she thought it rolled back behind her bedroom dresser and cedar chest.

I don't know how long she might have hunted for it, looking into corners, sweeping and searching, hoping to catch a glimpse of something shiny. But it seems to me, once she realized it was lost somewhere among those acres of vegetables, she probably assumed it was no use looking for the ring. After all, there were mouths to be fed and bills to be paid. Much as she may have wanted to, she did not have the time or energy to search for her lost wedding band. She gave up the search. But I wonder if, at those

moments when she most missed her late husband, she also remembered the lost ring that symbolized their union, and grieved.

I've come to the conclusion that if someone should ask me about my favorite stories in the Bible, I would tell them they can be found in chapter 15 in the gospel of Luke. They are stories of the lost being found. Today we read two of the stories from that chapter: The story of the lost sheep, and the story of the lost coin. The 3rd story in that chapter we read back in March, during the season of Lent—the story of the prodigal son, the lost son (or should I say “sons”?), the story of two sons, the younger and the older, who both seem to be rather lost. You might just want to read all of chapter 15 sometime, and hold those three stories together.

But as much as they are stories about people and animals and things that are lost, they are also stories of the desperate determination of the seeker to find what is lost and bring it home again. The shepherd who, some would say, recklessly leaves behind 99 vulnerable sheep in the wilderness to fend for themselves while he goes out to find the one lost sheep. The woman who stays up all night, turning her home upside down, wasting costly oil in her lamp and using all her energy to find the one lost coin. The father who cares not a bit about his dignity, and unashamedly runs down the road to meet his difficult, wayward son, embrace him, and welcome him home. And in all three cases, when the lost was found, there was much rejoicing. Friends were invited to share in that joy, and to celebrate!

Note the shepherd and the woman refused to give up the search. And the father was always at the ready to welcome, embrace, and forgive—both of his sons. Yes, these stories are as much about the seeker and finder as they are about the lost.

How does Chapter 15 open up? What's the incident that precipitates these stories of the lost being found? Well, it's **this** little scenario: Sinners have been coming to Jesus. Tax collectors and prostitutes and all kinds of seamy and questionable people have been drawing near to him to listen to his teachings. Jesus not only continues teaching in their presence, but he also welcomes them and eats with them. He sits at table with them and shares in the food spread before them.

This is scandalous. This is not what a good observant Jew should do. They should stay away from sinners. The religious leaders—those Pharisees and scribes who probably don't notice their own sinfulness or “lost-ness” are apoplectic when they witness Jesus dining with those sinners. The Pharisees and the scribes grumble among themselves.

And that's when Jesus tells stories about lost sheep and lost coins and lost sons, and the utter and endless determination of the seekers to bring them home.

What else can Jesus be speaking about but the utter and endless determination of God to seek us out and welcome us in to life with him? What else can Jesus be speaking about but the joy God experiences when you and I, his children, are near to him?

Oh, but we might not see ourselves as lost or even slightly confused about the direction we are moving in. You and I are probably more apt to see ourselves in the same light as the Pharisees and the scribes. Basically pretty good people, a few faults here and there, but not lost. And yet, if we searched ourselves, we might discover a “lost-ness” that permeates us.

--The young person considering what they will need to do in order to be “popular” at school. Are they perhaps lost?

--Or the couple slowly, almost imperceptibly growing farther apart, until they suddenly realize they haven't been a true union in a long, long time. Are they perhaps lost?

--Or the parents bound and determined to get their child in the best program, the best school to bring about the best possible chance for success, but meanwhile losing their sense of what parenting is really about.

--Or the person comparing themselves to others and always coming up lacking, feeling inadequate...and green with envy.

--Or the retiree, glad to leave behind long work hours, but now just a bit uncertain what will bring meaning, and what is their life's purpose.

--Or the person, in the midst of their heartache or worry or terrible trials, wondering where God is, and finding it difficult some days to trust and believe. Are these folks perhaps lost?

I figure there are a whole bunch of us, right here in this room, experiencing various types and degrees of “lost-ness.” But I am also convinced you and I are in this room today so that we might hear about this divine never-give-up attitude. About our God who remembers the lost and searches for us still. About a God willing to do anything—go out into the world's wilderness, enter into every dark corner, even die on a cross—in order to find us and draw us close in his kingdom of love.

Oh, you're probably wondering about the ring. Over 60 years would go by. My great-grandmother, before she died, passed the farm on the hill to my grandfather. He farmed it steadily and worked in the paper mill until the mid-1970's, when he was too crippled with arthritis to plow and plant and labor. My grandfather Burglund leased some of the acreage to his neighbors. And so it was that Otto Shippling, around 1978, while plowing the fields, noticed something shining bright in the soil, reflecting the sun. Thinking it was the pop-top of a soda can, Otto reached down and pulled out the gold band. He wiped away years of caked dirt and brought it to my grandfather. My grandfather remembered the lost ring, rejoiced at its finding, and gave it to my mother, who then gave it to me. It is a precious thing to me—this ring and its story.

Do you and I have any idea how precious **we**, and our fellow human beings, are to **God**? The Church proclaims that at every baptism. The Church speaks that every time a piece of bread is placed in our hands and we hear “The Body of Christ given for you.” The Church **lives** that as we love and serve our neighbors every day. Just so you and I and all people might at last begin to trust and believe God is near, arms open wide, ready to rejoice in us and with us. **AMEN.**

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