

Proper 19**1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10****Pastor Chris Bellefeuille****September 12, 2004****Centered Life Series #1**

When I was about 8 years old I got lost in the Sears store in St. Cloud. One minute I was next to my mom looking at something or other and the next minute she was gone. Luckily there was a service counter nearby where I could ask for help. They took me to the manager's office and pretty soon I heard my parent's names being called over the loudspeaker. "Will Keith and Natalie Bellefeuille please report to the manager's office?" I waited stoically until I saw my mom. Then I burst into tears, howling; "I was l-l-lost!"

Isn't it funny that it does not always occur to us that we are lost until we are found! Up until then I was a little anxious but I was okay. Things worked out just the way my parents and teachers said they would. I knew to find a safe adult. They responded calmly and kindly. They found my parents. Happy ending. But I had been lost. I knew it to the very core of my being. The next day or two were filled with wild imaginings about what horrors could have befallen me had I been in a less benevolent place than the St. Cloud Sears store.

Looking back on it, I am compelled to reflect on the other times that I did not realize I was lost until I had been found. Discovering God in a new way my freshman year in college. When a relationship ended and I felt set free. When I left a particular work environment. When I found out what work God was really calling me to do. Things hadn't been bad. I was pretty okay. But things were so much better after having been found.

Take a moment and think about a time that you were found. Perhaps you knew you had been lost all the while. But maybe you did not discover it until you had been found. What was that like for you? Did you feel the freedom and the joy that comes with being found? What was it like to reflect back and realize that you had been lost?

Jesus is talking about those that are lost: the sheep, the coin and the sinner. But notice who Jesus is talking. Jesus is telling this story to the tax collectors and the sinners. Much to the irritation of the Pharisees, Jesus is once again focusing on the lowest, the least and the lost. And Jesus is telling the lowest, the least and the lost that he will go to any length to find them.

Most of us have heard this bible story many, many times. And we have talked about ways to reach out the lost around us, to bring all of Jesus' sheep into the fold. But this morning I want you to take a little time to be the lost sheep or the lost coin. Some of you might bristle at that... proclaiming: "I'm not lost! I'm here, in church! What is Pastor Chris up to with this? Is she implying that I am lost and unaware of it? Wouldn't I know if I were lost?" But bear with me. I want you to think not just about what it means to be lost but about why Jesus cares so much about finding you? And I mean YOU!

By now many of you have heard or seen something about “Centered Life.” Centered Life is an initiative of Luther Seminary. And like churches of many denominations across the country, St. Barnabas is making the commitment to become a Centered Life church. To be a Centered Life church means we believe that all people are called to do God’s work in every aspect of their lives – in their homes, in their workplaces and in their communities. And we believe it is the responsibility of the congregation to help you uncover your gifts, identify your calling and support you as you live out your faith everyday in the world.

So what does Centered Life have to do with being a lost sheep? Well, let’s take a look at the letter to Timothy that was read this morning. The author writes: “I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence. [Even though I was lost] I received mercy...and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost, I am the most lost. But I received mercy, so that in me, as the most lost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.”

The writer of this letter understands profoundly what it means to be lost and what it means to be found. He was not found simply to be counted among the flock. He was found that he might serve. He has a role to play in the kingdom of God. He is necessary to the kingdom. Jesus sought him. Jesus brought him back. There is a direct connection between being found and serving God.

Now most of us do not think of ourselves as the absolute worst kind of sinner. But at some point in our lives we have felt like the lowest, the least or the lost. The point Jesus makes in the story of the coin and the sheep is the same point made in the letter to Timothy. Everyone is necessary to the kingdom, even the lowest, the least and the lost. After all, that is exactly who Jesus is talking to here. If even the worst sinner is gifted and called, if the sinners and tax collectors are sought, certainly each of us would also be gifted and called. Jesus finds us and returns us to the fold for a reason, for a purpose. Jesus wants to judge us faithful and appoint us to his service. Jesus wants to pour his grace into us so that we might be made an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

This should not be a source of stress for you. The idea of being a Centered Life church is not to make you feel you are not doing enough, that you need to sign up for things and serve on committees. The point of being a Centered Life church, as we will discover in these next few weeks, is to help you understand that you have each been gifted and called with a holy calling and you can serve God in the regular activities of your daily work and you can serve God in the regular activities of your daily lives.

Jesus seeks you out not because he likes round numbers, not just to count you among the fold. Jesus seeks you out and finds you because you each have a unique role, a unique ministry in the kingdom. From the lowest, the least and the lost to those who feel they might be on pretty firm footing. Each of you is being sought. You have been forgiven and washed in grace so that you might be able to live as found people.

Seven years ago I entered seminary because I was called by God to serve God’s church and God’s world in a particular way. I can tell you now that I was found. I was being carried back across the shepherd’s shoulders, grasped as the woman grasped the coin. Being returned to where I belonged. God gifted me. God called me. God has appointed me to God’s service.

A friend of mine liked her job in an insurance company but felt she would have to look outside the workplace for a way to serve God. The thought of adding more to her already burdened schedule was overwhelming. Then through prayer and conversation with her faith-based small group, she realized that by being an outstanding employee, a naturally gifted leader, a fair boss and a woman of faith, she was serving God in her daily work at the insurance company. Suddenly she too felt found, and discovered that she had been appointed to serve right where she was.

Some of you already know how you have been gifted and called to serve. Some of you are struggling to discover your gifts and your callings. A few weeks from now each of you will have a chance to share your feedback with us anonymously. You will be able to let us know what we can do to celebrate the way you are serving or you can let us know how we can help you discover your own gifts and callings.

God sought you out and celebrates finding you because God has work for you to do in this kingdom. You have been gifted and called to serve. You have received grace, mercy and forgiveness so that you can be an example to those who would come to believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life. It is no wonder that there is joy in heaven as each one of us is found.

Amen.