

“The God Who Never Takes A Hint”

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Text: Luke 15: 1-10

Are you familiar with the wonderful short story called “The Woman Who Wouldn’t Take A Hint?” Somerset Maugham tells of a young couple who were engaged to be married in the late 1930’s. Just before the wedding the groom was sent to Burma, and one difficulty after another kept them apart for seven years: her father died, the war began, he was sent to a post unsuitable for a woman.

Finally 7 years later wedding arrangements were made and George went down to the dock at Rangoon to meet his bride. While there, his nerve left him. Mabel would be a stranger. He couldn’t do it. And so immediately he got on a boat bound for Singapore, leaving a note for Mabel: “I suddenly have been called away on business and do not know when I shall be back. My plans are uncertain. Your loving George.”

When he got to Singapore, there was a cable: “Quite understand. Don’t worry. Love, Mabel.” This really frightened him and he hurried back to Bangkok and, still restless, on to Saigon. There he received a telegram with two words: “Love, Mabel.” Off he went to Hong Kong. From there to Manila, then to Shanghai and finally to Yokohama where he got another cable: “So sorry to have missed you in Manila. Love, Mabel.” Now he was frantic and doubled back to Shanghai, only to receive a cable: “Arriving shortly.” He headed up the Yangtze River to Chungking on the last steamer until Spring, and finally to a remote place in Northern China. After a few weeks of supposed contentment, George went out one morning to find Mabel on the steps of his house. “Hello, George. I was so afraid that I’d missed you again.” “Hello, Mabel,” he faltered. “You haven’t changed a bit,” she said. “Men can go off dreadfully in seven years and I was afraid that you’d got fat and bald. I’ve been so nervous. It would have been terrible if after all these years, I simply hadn’t been able to marry you.”

The story came up as two friends of George’s were remarking about how happy he was after thirty years of married life.

Is it too much to suggest that our lives in this Christian community are shaped around the basic affirmation that our God, like Mabel, is relentless in the pursuit of loving us? Jesus said as much in the parables just read when he compared our Creator to a shepherd who will risk all for one animal who is lost. Our Lord knew about the dangers that faced a shepherd every day in a rough and wild country like ancient Israel. If word reached a village that a shepherd had stayed behind to find a lost animal, anxiety would sweep over the small community, something akin to the feeling in Gloucester, Mass. when a colonial whaling ship had not returned and a storm was reported. There was great joy, the kind of joy that God experiences, when the shepherd came back into the village safe and sound.

The Bible teaches that God is as concerned for his people, you and me, as the woman was for the lost silver coin. In Israel, the mark of a married woman was a headdress of ten silver coins. Perhaps it was one of those pieces that had been lost, and to the woman it was as though she had lost her engagement or wedding ring. Surely you can appreciate the feeling. Jesus said that God feels the same way when those He has created and loved wander away. That’s how precious and important each one of us is to our Maker.

Three phrases based on these parables stand out in describing this God who simply will not take a hint. First, GOD SEEKS. Theologically, the Biblical God is unique because He intentionally reaches out to renew the partnership with his beloved people. It’s much more than our coming into his presence. God looks for us! As Psalm 139 reminds us, there is no place that we can go where the Almighty will not search us out.

Secondly, GOD SEEKS UNTIL. Like Mabel, there is no end to our Creator's perseverance. Indeed, scripture is nothing but the story of a God who will not give up his desire to have his creatures live as they were intended. You may have dropped out for thirty years in terms of religious interest, been following the gods of materialism, and yet God always pursues you out of love and concern. I heard a slogan one time that bears repeating: "If you don't feel as close to God as you once did, guess who moved."

GOD SEEKS UNTIL there is a reuniting and then, thirdly, there is great JOY. The village rejoices when the shepherd returns. The woman rejoices when she finds the coin. God rejoices when we begin to walk in his ways again. Life takes on new beauty and purpose. To return to the fold means not only that one's eternity is assured but that each day becomes a little brighter. That's why joy is always part of returning to the divine/human partnership.

The promise is for all of us because at some level we all know what it is like to be "lost" and the joy of being led back home.

It would be tempting to leave the story at this point: God seeks us; there is great joy when we are "found." Sounds good, doesn't it? Jesus, however, might have been thinking in broader terms in these parables of "lostness." He demonstrated a tremendous concern for those who are defined as "lost" by society standards and clearly envisioned his followers reaching out to those who are regarded as outsiders. The Pharisees never grasped this truth and presumed that because they were religious that was sufficient to please God. Thus, they constantly were criticizing Jesus because he kept saying that God cared even more for those who labeled "the wrong kind of people." Why would he spend time with tax collectors and other disreputable characters? The same question continues to be raised about his followers. Why should the Church speak out on behalf of farm workers or the inequities of our justice system? Don't we have enough problems of our own, why take on others?

For 2,000 years such confusion has plagued Christ's Church. I have heard more than one Christian, by implication if not word, say, "why bother with those people? They're not our kind." The Biblical response is: "Those people out there," whether they be the lost children of middle class families or the lost children of poverty, whether they be adults from this area looking for employment or the homeless downtown waiting for the shelter to open, whether they are hurting spiritually or just hurting, ALL are God's children! Jesus went and intentionally stood among them, spent time with them, had supper with them, cried with them, cared about their welfare. Can the Church, if faithful to its Lord, do any less? Can we be satisfied if the Good Shepherd wraps us in love while the rest of the world is a hurting place?

So at the same time we affirm God's love for each of us we need also to be keenly aware of our Creator's concern for those who are suffering "out there." As I think about it, "lost" can have two meanings in the parables. There is the spiritual distance between ourselves and God that our Maker continually tries to bridge; and there is the "lostness" of those who for one reason or other have been shut out of society. Clearly Jesus cared deeply about these children of God as he cares about us.

Thus start with your own spiritual need but don't stop there. The question to begin with is could it be that wherever we go, whatever stage of life we happen to be at, that there is deep within us a longing for home, reunion with all that is universal, a partnership with our Maker? Could it be that, amidst all of our hopes and dreams for life, greater than the wish to take advantage of a good deal on a new car or the desire for a bigger home or more prestige, there is a still, small discontented part of the inner us that longs for this "Love that will not let us go?"