3-17/18-18 Rev. Amy Haines

Lk 15:1-10, Mk 14: 3-9 Foolish Love…Is Costly Lenten Series

My sophomore year at band camp at Wright State, one of my fellow flute players suddenly realized that she had lost her boyfriend’s class ring. On the practice field. After two hours of marching drills. How she did not feel the ring slip off her finger, I will never know.

It was time for us to go in for lunch. Instead, about a dozen of us began to spread out across the grass, searching for the lost class ring. We figured our chance of finding the ring was about the same as finding a needle in a haystack. The grass needed mowing. Our drills had taken us all over the field. Yet we continued to search, knowing our time was limited. Suddenly, about the time we were going to give up the search, the cry went up—found it! The lost ring had been found. And there was much rejoicing on the way in to lunch.

I am always amazed at how the lost and found bin here at the church and preschool quickly fills up. Sweatshirts. Glasses. Lunch boxes. Water bottles. School projects. We’ve even had keys and jewelry and a book or two left behind. Some items are later claimed by their rightful owner. Many items are later donated or thrown away.

Can you remember a time when you lost something? How did you react? Did you turn everything upside down looking for your lost item? Or did you shrug your shoulders, think, “Oh, well,” and went out to buy a replacement?

Oftentimes I have found the more valuable the item, monetarily or sentimentally, the more time and effort I will spend searching for that which is lost. I will spend the time searching for important paperwork, or a specific photo, or family heirlooms. With all of our moves sometimes it is a matter of figuring out which box or bin the item is in. I will spend less time searching for a magazine, a certain toy, or a missing sock.

We will search for that which we value—even when our searching seems foolish to those around us. Why search for reading glasses when you can pick up another pair at the drugstore?

Why search for a specific Christmas present when cash is easier to give? Why search for name brand clothes for young children when they will outgrow them in six months? Why search for a way to balance church and sports activities?

We will search for that which we value—even when our search is costly. And what search does not cost us something? Sometimes the cost is to our emotions, as we are anxious or worried or fearful or hopeful. Sometimes the cost comes in time or effort. Sometimes the cost is financial.

And sometimes the cost is to our reputations or even our very lives.

As we wind down the season of Lent, arriving next week at the beginning of Holy Week with the joy of palms that leads us to the agony of the cross before we ever arrive at the wonder of the empty tomb, our Scriptures today once again remind us that God’s foolish love is costly. Jesus was nailed to the cross because the religious leaders did not understand Jesus’ abundant love for all.

As we gather today for worship, giving thanks for God’s foolish love for us, we also must acknowledge that as we seek to follow in Christ’s footsteps, as we seek to live as disciples of Jesus, reflecting God’s foolish love in our lives will also be costly. Discipleship is not simply the prosperity gospel, where if only you believe you will be blessed. Rather, discipleship is the way of the cross, which is costly and grace-filled, sacrificial and joyful.

Jesus valued everyone he encountered on the road to Jerusalem—tax collectors and sinners, Pharisees and scribes. The crowd that followed Jesus wherever he went was comprised of an odd assortment of righteous and sinner, leaders and outcasts, men and women, curious and hostile and faithful.

In our passage today from Luke, Jesus was once again welcoming the tax collectors and sinners to come near, along with his disciples and followers and the religious leaders. The tax collectors were Jewish men whom everyone knew cheated the system, collecting from their fellow Jews more than what they owed to Rome in order to make money off of the misery of others. Sinners were those who habitually lived in such a way that was contrary to God’s ways.

Time and again in the Gospel of Luke Jesus not only is surrounded by such outcasts, but also breaks bread with them at table, accepting them as equals, treating them as he would treat any of God’s beloved sons or God’s beloved daughters.

And each time Jesus welcomed those whom others considered as outcasts, the religious leaders, the Pharisees and the scribes, grumbled. How dare he eat with them? How dare he treat them as equals? How dare he act as if God is pleased with them? They didn’t follow the rules! They didn’t adhere strictly to the Law of Moses! They may be God’s children, but they sure don’t act like God’s chosen. How dare Jesus welcome all?

Jesus knew what was said about him. He knew the reputation he had not only as a rabbi, who spoke with authority and passion on living by God’s ways, but also as a rabble rouser, who did not adhere strictly to the traditions that governed Jewish life. He picked grain and healed on the Sabbath. He forgave sins and welcomed sinners.

The Pharisees grumbled about Jesus. And missed that he cared for them, as well. He knew his purpose was to welcome the sinner, yet also expand the welcome of the righteous. Jesus yearned to move the religious leaders beyond religion to relationship, beyond judgment to grace, beyond fear to hope.

So in response to the grumbling of the religious leaders, Jesus shared three parables, three exaggerated stories that speak to us about the ways of God, three parables often called the “Lost Parables.” Today we have heard the first two. The third one is the parable of the Prodigal Son.

“Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn’t he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.”

“Or what woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won’t light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner

who changes both heart and life.”

Consider the costly, foolish love lifted up in these parables. Both the shepherd and the woman had to take time out of their normal day, away from their normal chores, to look for that which was lost. They both had to make an effort to search diligently to find that which was lost. The shepherd risked financial ruin, if something tragic has occurred to the other 99 sheep while he was away. This was desert wilderness, full of rocky ground, sudden drop-offs, hidden snakes and scorpions. Anything could have happened to the 99 while he searched for the one. The woman’s coin could have been part of her dowry, 1/10 of everything she owned, and to lose just one coin risked financial ruin, for her father’s household as well as her groom to be. Both the shepherd and the woman could have also lost their dependable reputations if they did not find that item which was lost.

We can relate to such risk and fear, such anxiety and determination to find that which was lost.

We can also relate to their relief at finding their lost items. But to celebrate so lavishly that which was lost? That is where these parables take a twist, wake us up and shake us out of our comfort zones.

Who in their right minds would throw a party to celebrate the lost found? Who would foolishly waste money to celebrate found money? Who would want to admit that a valuable sheep had wandered off, and the other 99 were at risk while the one was found?

This is where our parables take a twist. And we realize Jesus isn’t really talking about our desire to search for that which is lost. Instead, Jesus is talking about God’s desire that the lost would be found. And Jesus is talking about God’s joy when even one sinner repents, turning their lives away from the sins of the world and turning toward God’s ways of love and hope, peace and joy.

Imagine the look of joy on their faces of the shepherd and the woman when what was lost was finally found! Now imagine the look of joy on God’s face when one sinner repents, changing heart and mind and life!

We can all share our stories of lost and found all day long, stories of stress and adventure, stories of sorrow and celebration, yet in the end these parables are not about lost stuff. They are about lost people.

At some point in our lives, all of us have been or will be lost. Lost from a relationship with God.

Lost from close connections with others. Lost from an eternal purpose that gives meaning to this life. At some point in our lives we all will recognize we are all sinners in need of God’s grace.

Then we hear parables such as these today, and are reminded that even as we are sinners in need of grace, we are valued by God. We are loved by God. And God is the one who will never give up searching for us. And God is the one who will never stop rejoicing when we are found.

We might relate more to the religious leaders, or we might relate more to the outcasts. In whatever way we view ourselves, remember that we are all still God’s beloved.

And God will never give up reaching out to us with hope and forgiveness, with love and grace, calling us back to a right relationship with God through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Have you ever seen the movie *Finding Nemo*? I like to consider it a modern day parable.

*Finding Nemo* is an animated movie about a young male fish who gets caught in a net in the middle of the ocean and sent to an aquarium in a dentist’s office. The action of the movie, however, follows Nemo’s father, who is scared to death of the unknown dangers beyond the reef where they lived, yet risks his life to venture out across the great wide ocean in search of his missing son. The father loves his missing son so much that he ignores the risks of man, sharks and birds in order to continue his search of Nemo. And when father and son finally find each other, there is rejoicing in the water as well as on land, a celebration of life, love and the lost being found.

On this final Sunday of Lent, how do you respond to God’s foolish love pursuing you? How do you respond to God’s celebratory joy when you seek forgiveness of your sins and a new life through Christ? How do you respond to God’s costly grace with your worship and your faith?

In our Gospel passage from Mark, we encounter a woman who responds to Jesus with great love and great risk.

Two days before the Passover festival at which Jesus would suffer and die, Jesus was the honored guest at a meal in the house of Simon the Leper in the village of Bethany. We can presume that Simon had been one healed by Jesus, or else he would still be an outcast begging at the edge of the city. Bethany was a favorite respite for Jesus, also the town of Lazarus and Mary and Martha.

During the meal, a woman dared to enter and approach Jesus. Most scholars agree that this is not the sinful woman of Luke 7, nor is it Mary of Magdala. In the Gospel of John this woman is named as Mary, sister of Martha, the one who yearned to simply sit and learn at the feet of Jesus. This woman is named as Mary, sister of Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by Jesus and given a second chance at life in this world.

Mary interrupted the meal by approaching Jesus, and in her hands she held an alabaster jar containing very expensive perfume of pure nard, worth the equivalent of almost one year’s wage. Most likely this was the most expensive item in Mary’s dowry, something that she was to keep and offer to her future husband, much like the coins in our second parable from Luke.

Instead of keeping this expensive perfume for herself, Mary broke open the alabaster jar, and poured the perfume on Jesus. This is also the same fragrance that was used often for burial, so Jesus not only saw her action as selfless giving, he also saw her action as a proper anointing for all that was to come.

Mary offered the perfume, and herself, as an offering of worship, an act of devotion, a thankfulness for all that Jesus meant to her as her Savior and Lord.

And like the religious leaders in Luke, here the disciples and others at table with Jesus grew angry at Mary. Why so wasteful? Why not sell this perfume and give the money to the poor? Why did she act so out of character and context, risking her reputation by approaching Jesus in such a way?

Jesus, however, commended her act of faithfulness, her act of love, her act of worship. He called it a beautiful thing. A good service. Her foolish love for Jesus was costly—and Jesus honored her.

When we value a relationship with God, through faith in Christ Jesus, our foolish love for Jesus will come with a cost. We may be ridiculed for our faith. We may be dismissed as fools. We may be questioned when we place church above other priorities in our life. We may be challenged when we stand up for business practices that honor others rather than put them down. There are many other places we could be on a Saturday night or a Sunday morning other than worship. There are many other items we could spend our money on than our intentional financial commitment to the church.

.. Tim Keller, pastor of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, talks about meeting with a woman who had just started attending his church. Before that, she had never heard about the distinction between the gospel and religion, between grace and a works-based righteousness. She had never heard about God’s unconditional love. Instead, she thought that God accepts us only if we are good enough, and she told her pastor that the new message was scary.

Tim Keller asked her why it was scary and she replied: “If I was saved by my good works then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with ‘rights’– I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if I am a sinner saved by grace – then there’s nothing he cannot ask of me.”

Tim Keller said, “She understood the dynamic of grace and gratitude. If when you have lost all fear of punishment you also lose all incentive to live a good, unselfish life, then the only incentive you ever had to live a decent life was fear. This woman could see immediately that the wonderful-beyond-belief teaching of salvation by sheer grace had an edge to it. She knew that if she was a sinner saved by grace, she was (if anything) more subject to the sovereign Lordship of God. She knew that if Jesus really had done all this for her, she would not be her own. She would joyfully, gratefully belong to Jesus, who provided all this for her at infinite cost to himself.

--Timothy Keller, The Reason for God, pp. 189-190on PreachingToday.com

as shared by C Philip Green “Lavish Love” 4-21-10 sermoncentral.com

There is a cost to respond to God’s foolish love for us with our foolish love for God and others.

That is what this entire Lenten series has reminded us. Faith is more than intellectual assent. Faith is God’s ways lived out in our ways, God’s love shown in our love, God’s grace shared with others as it has been shared with us. The world may call us foolish. Yet we live by the foolish message of the cross.

As we move next week into the journey of Holy Week, may we continue to consider the cost of following Jesus, and what it cost Jesus to show and share God’s foolish love for us.

Yet may we also continue to imagine the joy on God’s face when God sees our faith and faithfulness. Imagine the party in heaven each time the lost is found and a sinner welcomes the gift of amazing grace.

May it be so. Let us pray.