

**Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois  
September 15, 2013**

**Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.**

**“Being Found”**

**Text\_\_Luke 15: 1-10**

I begin today with a story. An animal story. It's not about a sheep. Not even a shaggy dog story, but one about a cat. It began at church one Sunday as I sat in my customary place in the soprano section of the choir. In this church, during the prayers of the people, folk in the congregation would stand up to share their joys and concerns—often for the births of children or grandchildren, healing for themselves or loved ones, for good outcomes to medical tests or job interviews or even school exams. On this day, a woman rather new to the church, one I didn't know very well, asked for a place for her family to stay for a little while. They were in between leases, my older son Rich was off at college, and Dan and I were rattling around in a big old house. At coffee hour I offered to take them in, never expecting that she would accept! A week or so later, this single mom, a teenage girl, a boy of about 11 or 12, and two cats joined Dan and me and our old alley cat for a month or so. We had some adjustments to make, to schedules, ways of living, and so forth. But more important than that was recognizing that this was a traumatic time for the children—a time of anxiety about this temporary living arrangement and what the future would hold for their family. So, we tried to be very sensitive to their vulnerability.

The boy had a favorite pet that gave him some comfort—a black and white cat—all black except for a white collar—appropriately named “Tuxedo.” Given the importance of this cat to the boy, you might imagine my horror one afternoon to see Tuxedo running across the street and into the neighbor's shrubs! Tuxedo was not supposed to be out of the house, but I, accustomed to leaving the front door open when I went out to putter in the yard, had forgotten that. Without any further thought, I dropped what I was doing and took off across the street, too, chasing after that cat. But he kept ahead of me, darting around and through the bushes and then beyond that yard and out of sight.

I lost him. And the worst thing happened—the kids got home from school and I had to tell them that Tuxedo was missing. The kids took off in different directions, and when their mother got home from work, she went out in the car. After a while, we all straggled back to the house, but there was no cat. The boy was heartbroken, and I was devastated at my carelessness. We all sat around the supper table with long faces, wondering what to do next. Wondering if Tuxedo would—or could—find his way back to a strange, new neighborhood. About that time, Tuxedo came ambling down the stairs, yawning and stretching in that way that only cats can do after a long, luxurious afternoon nap in some hidden corner of the house. You can probably also imagine the rejoicing and celebration that took place when that lost cat was found. Well, the cat was really never lost, of course, but we rejoiced nevertheless.

Jesus told the story of the shepherd who went out after the lost sheep, leaving 99 other sheep alone in the wilderness, vulnerable to the weather and to any predators that liked to feast on sheep. Unlike Tuxedo, the sheep in Jesus' story really was lost. Still, the actions of the shepherd and of us were similar. We gave no thought to what we left behind—a wide open house, two other cats, the tasks in the yard, homework, and all the other things on our various schedules. The search for the lost became the priority, and nothing else mattered until the lost was found. The same was true of Jesus' other story about the woman who lost one of her coins—10% of her meager savings. (I suspect that any of us who experience a 10% loss in our retirement accounts or a 10% reduction in

our salaries would be mighty upset—and it wouldn't even help to light a candle and sweep the floorboards!).

The importance of finding the lost is clearly the prime message in these parables of Jesus. Whether it is one in ten, one in a hundred, one in a million, God, the shepherd, God the housewife, reaches out to find the one that is lost.

Now, it seems to me, there are different ways of being lost. Each and everyone of us becomes lost from time to time, sometimes just straying a bit from the path, sometimes so far from the road, so deep in the wilderness that even a map won't help us find the way back. The question is, do we want to be found? Do we really want to be back in God's fold where we must turn our lives over to something greater than our own wants and needs and desires? Or would we really rather keep on straying away chasing after those worldly things that seem to be most important?

Sometimes we are lost and don't even know it. We may be so caught up in the myriad details of our frantic lives, so preoccupied that we do not even notice—until one morning, we wake to find that our souls have withered from starvation, that there is a huge chasm inside of us, a vast canyon between ourselves and our God.

Others of us may live what we believe is a Godly life, attending church, giving to the poor, praying and even reading the Bible from time to time. We become complacent and maybe even a little self-righteous. We do not think we are lost. Others are. That's the role the Pharisees in this parable played—grumbling among themselves about who Jesus was hanging out with—not the “members,” the insiders, the ones who know and follow the Law but the sinners, the shunned, those who have not been welcomed into the closed and righteous circle.

Now, it is comforting to identify with the sheep or the coin and know that whether we are just a little bit lost or so hopelessly lost that the map won't help, we will be sought by our loving God, for God's Global Positioning System is better than any map. And, indeed, that message is true and real.

But it is not the message today. Jesus did not tell these stories to comfort the Pharisees. He told these stories to *discomfort* them, to remind them of their responsibilities as faithful people of God. The message today was directed toward the grumbling Pharisees, who, though they were lost sheep, were also called upon to be shepherds, to be housekeepers—to be seeking and finding the lost rather than sitting around deciding who was “worthy” of being found and, thus, part of the inner circle. The message today was directed toward the Pharisees but is equally directed toward the people of God in this time and place.

On this day we gather as we do each Sunday. Sometimes, we probably look around us at all of our family and friends. We think, too, about those who are not here—those who are ill, those who have died, those who have moved away, those who have drifted away from the church. We are grateful for those who are here and pray for those who are lost to us.

But Jesus' parables speak to us just as they did to the Pharisees. We, too, are the people of God, and as the church, as the body of Christ that carries out God's work in the world, we may not limit ourselves to the “insiders” or even to the friends and family members of the insiders. We may not simply protect and care for the 99 unlost sheep or 9 coins in our pocket. We may not simply hope that some of the lost will happen to wander through our doors. We may not simply wait quietly to welcome them. Just as God cares deeply for every living creature, just as God goes out and seeks even the most lost of the lost, we are called to do the same. And, furthermore, when we find them, we are to throw the very best and most joyous party ever to celebrate their being found. For when even one is missing, our world, the creation, is not complete.

To this day, I don't know whose cat we were chasing around that spring afternoon. I had never seen a cat like that before in the neighborhood, and did not see one after. Perhaps Tuxedo

sneaked back inside while we were out searching. Perhaps it was some kind of “ghost” cat or a figment of my imagination. All I know is that the fear of loss made Tuxedo even more precious than before. And, in fact, made all three of the cats—and, for that matter, each of us humans—more precious, too. God’s treasure. And we rejoiced!

Amen.