Sunday, February 1, 1981
NOT ALL STORIES HAVE HAPPY ENDINGS (The Story of Bill Smalley)
Luke 15:3-10

I first saw Bill one Sunday morning in August of 1961. He had come to church with his sister. I noticed him because he hadn't been there before and because he was tall, very thin, wore a pair of glasses which had been taped together, and a crumpled blue suit, too small. After the church ser-vice, I greeted him along with the others, and asked his name and where he lived. He said that he had just returned to the town to live with his stepmother and stepfather. His stepmother was a member of our church.

The next Sunday, Bill was in church again. I spoke to him and welcomed him. A few weeks later, I had occasion to call in the home of his stepmother. I asked her about Bill since she had never mentioned him before. She said that she had never told anyone about Bill, and that when he returned recently, she told the neighbors that he had been living in California and working there. But the truth was, she admitted, that he had been in a boy's re-formatory for the last three years and had recently been released on parole.

She said that he was her stepson and that he had been in trouble of one kind or another since he was a small child. He had a history of running away from home, stealing, running with gangs, arson, using drugs, and more. His real father had been killed by a train about four years ago. He had been drunk and wandered onto an oncoming freight train. Bill's real mother had abandoned the family many years ago when Bill was about four years old, and no one had seen or heard from her since. The father had re-married years later to the woman to whom I was talking, but in the meantime, the two children, Bill and his sister, had been shuffled from relatives, to orphanages, to juvenile homes, and foster parents. Then when the father had re-married, he had taken Bill and his sister into the new marriage. However, this woman had also been married before and divorced and had several children which she brought into the marriage and then they had several children and now this same woman was married again and had several more children. So actually, under the same roof, lived children of four different marriages.

About this time, Bill came into the room. He was shy and difficult to talk to. I told him that I wanted to be his friend, and that I hoped he would continue to attend our worship services and that if he needed help in finding a job or in any other way, he should call me. His step-mother said he had a job which began the following week. He was to work for her brother. I didn't see much of Bill or hear from him during the next six weeks.

Then in October 1961, I attended a pastor's school in Detroit. Upon returning home, my wife said that Bill had telephoned one night. She told him I was out of town and asked if there was anything she could do. He wouldn't say what he wanted and hung up. A few days later, one of our church members called and asked if I knew that Bill was in the County Jail?

I didn't know this. In checking further, I discovered that while I was in Detroit, Bill had broken into a home in a neighboring suburb, ransacked the house, taken all the money he could find, plus some tools and an old re-volver which didn't work. Then the next morning he turned himself in at the local police station and confessed. No one had come to see him in jail or offered help. He had then been sent to the Cook County Jail in Chicago, to await trial.

I decided to visit him in jail, but not being acquainted with procedures, I assumed that as a minister, I could go to the jail and visit him. Such was not the case. Cook County Jail is a maximum-security institution. I got as far as an interview with the warden's secretary. She told him that I had to have with me and deposit with them a certified copy of my ordination certificate, which at that time was in a frame on my office wall. I returned home without being able to see Bill.

I did, however, find out the date of his trial, which was to be the following Monday in the local police court where the crime had been committed. I made plans to attend that hearing and was sure that I could see him.

I was able to visit with him that night in the local jail and was allowed to sit with him throughout the evening in the courtroom as we waited for his case to be heard. He told me that he had tried to contact me while I was in Detroit, to see if I could help him find a new job and a different place to live. His stepmother didn't want him, and the job he had with her brother was all work and no pay. He received about $15.00 per week for 50 hours' work. And then his stepmother took this for his room and board. He didn't even have any decent clothes to wear. He had called me for help and since I was out of town, had gotten desperate and returned to his old ways.

He looked awful that night in court, although he seemed happy to have someone to be with him. In the previous two weeks, no one had visited him or written him. Furthermore, he was wearing the same clothes. Here was a forgotten person.

Bill pleaded guilty that night and since he was 18, he was bound over to the jurisdiction of Cook County and returned to the Cook County Jail. I told him I would talk with his stepmother and bring some clothes to him or have her do it, and that I would visit him soon.

I visited his stepmother the following morning and she promised that she would take clothes to him in a few days. But she didn't do it. Over and over, I went to see her, but nothing happened. So, I took some of my own clothes and some money, since toothpaste and such items had to be purchased within the jail. This time I also took along my ordination certificate and got to see Bill. It was his first change of clothes in over three weeks. He also said that I was the first visitor he had ever had during his various stays in juvenile homes, reform schools, and jails. He had never received even one letter from anyone during all those years. Here was a human being who felt that no one cared for him.

I continued to visit Bill in the Cook County jail and took clean clothes and small amounts of money. In December of 1961, he was indicted and ordered to stand trial in the Criminal Court of Cook County.

In all these months, I continued to be the only person to visit or write to him. In each letter he wrote me, there was the same message, "Please come and visit me."

I went to his trial. His lawyer was the public defender. The trial was brief. Bill's plea was guilty, and the state's attorney recommended that he be sentenced from one to three years in the state prison. The judge then asked to hear from me. I said that I was there as a friend and that our congregation was interested in Bill. I also told the judge of Bill's background and the impossibility of his living with his stepmother.

The judge agreed to continue the case for 90 days and said that if I and our congregation could come up with some plan or suggestion, Bill might be put in our custody on pro-bation instead of being put in the state prison.

I had not anticipated this but accepted the challenge. If we could come up with a plan, maybe this lost sheep could be saved. Three years in the state prison for this young man and a hardened criminal would probably emerge.

During the coming weeks, I came up with the idea of finding a number of families in our small congregation who would form one large family and then Bill cou1d spend some time each year with each family in the group. I presented my plan to the judge, and he said he was willing to give it a try. But now to find the families.

At the congregation's annual meeting, I presented the case, using the parable of the lost sheep as the text. I then asked that any interested families should see me after the meeting. Eight families volunteered that night. All except one had several young children of their own.

A week or so later, I visited Bill and told him of our plan. He couldn't believe it. No one had ever wanted him before. He was sure he was going to be sent to the state prison. However, in March, at the end of the 90 days, I went to court again and brought Bill home with me that same day. The judge had sentenced him to three years' probation under the care of our congregation. He was to stay with our family in our home for the first several weeks as he got adjusted to his new life. Our oldest daughter Krista was about three and a half years old and Caris about six months old.

We found Bill a job in a factory nearby, with a promise of a better job in the fall. In a few weeks, he officially joined the church. The eight families plus ours came to be his larger family, and he accepted them as such. On Mother's Day, each of the nine mothers received a small corsage from Bill. We knew we were taking a risk. Bill had a history of running away and might do so at any time.

As time passed, Bill seemed to be a changed person. He gained weight. He was able to smile. But one night a few months later, he disappeared. He had walked off his job that morning and no one had seen him since. We knew that he had an uncle in California. I tried to telephone that uncle, but no phone was listed. We did have his address. Finally, I called the local police in that town in California and asked if they would go to the home and if Bill was there, to tell him to call me collect immediately. A few hours later, Bill called. I told him we wanted him back. I also reminded him that he was due to report to the probation officer in a few days and to not report would mean breaking probation and a warrant would be issued for his arrest. He agreed to return and took the next plane for Chicago. One of the families met him at the airport.

However, in getting money to go to California, Bill had taken all the money from his small savings account and had also overdrawn his checking account. He had broken pro-bation by leaving the state, but we told him we would back him. The probation department agreed to give him another chance. We found him another job and he was back at work.

Then again, a few months later, he ran away. This time, however, he took the car of the family he was staying with, plus some of their money and two rifles. He was arrested in Indiana and returned to the Cook County Jail. The families in the church continued to write to him and visit him, but he was sentenced to three years in the State prison.

In the meantime, one of the eight families had gone to court and asked the judge if they could take over the responsibil-ity for caring for him completely. The court agreed to give it a try. Also, in the meantime our family had moved from the Chicago area to the St. Louis area, but we were kept informed of what was happening.

Bill was loved by this family as if he were their own son. But again, in about three months, his old urge to run away returned. He went south and, on his way, committed some minor thefts. He was picked up within a few days in southern Illinois, went back to court, and was put in prison.

The family who had adopted him continued to write to him and I did also. Since he was in a prison in southern Illinois, I was also able to visit him in person from time to time. I still have a file with most of his letters to me. Later we moved to New Jersey and lost all contact.

We did learn, however, that the family who had adopted him was planning to give him a home and their support when he had served out his sentence. We know also that all of the families who participated in the project did not feel that all was lost. In fact, two of the families later adopted Bill's younger sister and she did exceptionally well.

An experience like this tells us many things. First, some lost sheep get lost over and over again and need to be found over and over again. God has not promised that we will be successful in all of our endeavors and with all of our good intentions. Some stories do not have a necesari1y happy ending.

Second, God calls us above all to be faithful in what we undertake. As I look back, I am absolutely amazed at the daring and faithfulness of those eight young families. All had small houses and children of their own and it was an inconvenience and sacrifice on their part.

God has put us into a world where we are to care for one another. And when we care for each other, healing takes place. Bill returned to prison, but he was no longer alone. He found God and he found others who cared for him. The story had an unhappy ending in one sense but a new beginning. No new beginnings are possible without endings, happy or unhappy.

While in prison, Bill began to write poetry. One of the last poems he sent to me had these lines..."I have found where God is. God is in Church and the forest and most of all, he is with You.... I am a man now and I love and believe in God. I may not be a man in man's eyes, but I am in God's eyes."

Bill is just one person, but that one person is God's creature and as important as anyone else. God has not asked us to do everything; we are only asked to do what we can. It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. God does not always promise success, but God does promise to be with us. Amen.