Sunday, September 28, 1986
LOST AND FOUND
Luke 15:1-10

Here are two short parables about something being lost and then found. In the first parable, it is a sheep, and in the second, a coin, and in each case, there is a search, and when that which was lost is found, there is rejoicing. We know the feeling. All of us have at one time or another lost something which to us had great value, and after a long search, if we found what had been lost, there was rejoicing. Every now and then, we read or hear in the news about a child being lost, and a tremendous search is organized, and then if the lost child is safely found, there is almost no end to the joy that is experienced.

When Jesus first told these stories about a lost sheep and a lost coin, He was responding to criticism that was being leveled against Him by the religious authorities of His time. The main point of the criticism was that He spent too much time with the "lost" people in that society — the sinners and the publicans; people who were considered by many to be worthless. The publicans were the tax collectors, Jews who had sold themselves to collect Roman taxes from their oppressed countrymen for a fee, and sinners were people who were careless of the religious law. Thus, the criticism of Jesus was based on the assumption that some people in society are worthless, they are lost forever, and it is a waste of time to be in any kind of relationship with them. Jesus not only spent time with such lost people, but He even ate with them. To eat with someone in that culture was to treat them as equals — it was full acceptance.

It was in response to such criticism that Jesus told the stories about the shepherd leaving his 99 sheep to search and find the one lost sheep and the woman who had lost one coin out of ten, searching until she found the lost coin. And in each case, there was a big party held to celebrate afterward.

What do these two parables have to say to us?

First of all, they present a new conception of God. They tell of the seeking love of God which will not give up anyone for lost. This love of God will seek and search forever if necessary. From our practical point of view, this searching love of God takes a lot of foolish risks. In the parable, the shepherd was not a prudent person, that is, he did not play percentages. He left the 99 sheep in the wilderness, unprotected, while he went to search for the one lost sheep.

So, to repeat the first point again — the love of God as expressed in Jesus Christ seeks all people, no matter how lost or how worthless they might seem to us, and this love of God never gives up until the lost are found.

The second main point of the parables is this: each human being is a creature of absolute worth in the sight of God — even those that each society may consider lost and therefore worthless. Jesus said over and over again, "I have come to seek and to save that which is lost."
Now let's attempt to make these two short parables contemporary. If the publicans and the sinners were considered to be the "lost" and therefore worthless in Jesus' time, who are the lost and therefore worthless in today's world?

From the point of view of many in our time, those who have AIDS are lost and should be isolated from the rest of society. Some Christians are even convinced that the disease is a judgment from God. Yet, I think Jesus would seek them out, accept them as having worth as creatures of God, and would want us to do the same.

A second group in our time who are frequently considered outcasts and lost by some people are homosexuals. Like the religious people of Jesus' time, if we saw Jesus frequently being with homosexuals and eating with them, we might be highly critical of His activity. Yet, I believe, based on these parables, Jesus would seek them out.

A third group of people considered to be lost by some of us are those who are in prison. "Lock them up and throw away the key" is the attitude I frequently hear voiced. "Who cares how crowded the jails and prisons are? Most of these people are worthless anyway." What we are saying is that we don't care what happens to such people, and by implication, that God doesn't care either. They are among the lost.

Even we, because we are members of a church like this one, are considered by some among the lost. There are severe divisions within the Christian church. Some who are members of one brand of Christianity consider others who are of a different brand—"lost and damned forever." Ironically, too, within the Christian church, with all of its divisions, there are those who would eat a meal with you or me in our homes or in a restaurant but would not be able, according to their belief, to eat the Lord's Supper together in their church worship service.

So there are lots of "lost" people in our society. I'm sure that you can think of other categories of those among us who are considered worthless and lost.

Yet if we want to be brutally honest about it, is there anyone here who has not felt "lost" at one time or another? Whether or not anyone else considered you "lost," you felt "lost" within yourself, that is, you felt that your life had no direction, that you were simply going through the motions of living without much meaning in any of it. Maybe you felt unconnected and therefore utterly alone, or you were confused, perplexed, or perhaps you felt as if everyone else had forgotten about you. Then you know the feeling of being lost.

Who are the lost in our time? Each one of us at one time or another is or has been lost. Someone once described the lost as a person who has lost the confidence and the power of belief in other human beings and in God. Another person said, "A person is lost when he or she cannot define his or her present or plan for the future."

We can be lost in so many ways. Sometimes we are lost in the fog of fear, anxiety, and worry, and we grope frantically, even desperately, for a sure way to the level of clear vision.

Sometimes we are lost in the jungles of passion, hatred, and vengeance, and then we are unable to see others as they are or to judge events fairly, and we react in spasms of uncontrolled fury.

Sometimes we are lost in the depression of grief because of the death of someone we love, and we live for a time with no sense of direction or meaning.

Sometimes we are lost in an illness like alcoholism as it fastens itself upon us, stripping us of confidence and self-respect, and we have neither the courage nor the stamina to face the

problems and reverses that must be faced in daily living, or a person gets lost in the addiction of some other kind of drug.

Sometimes we are lost because of defeat and disappointment and thus we find ourselves in periodic and full retreat from the inevitable encounters of life.

Sometimes people get lost in middle age and see no more challenge to live and want to give up.

Sometimes we get lost in our ambition to get ahead and sell our souls.

Sometimes a person loses his or her job and feels lost and has no sense of worth because all of one's worth was tied up in the job.

Sometimes when a person retires, he or she feels totally lost and worthless.

Sometimes we get lost simply by wandering off course gradually, and then one day we realize that we are lost.

A farmer came down the lane. "Got a stray," he said to the city man. "How do they get lost?" asked the city man. "They just nibble themselves lost," said the farmer. "They keep their heads down, wander from one green tuft to another, come to a hole in the fence, and never can find a hole by which to get back again."

Our most discerning writers are well aware of the tragedy of this fact of lostness. Dostoevsky could describe it with unparalleled power because for years, he, himself, was lost in a mania for gambling that stripped him of morals and dependable character. Finally, he hit bottom when he stole his sick wife's clothing, pawned it, and then lost the money at the wheel. Utterly destitute of both money and self-respect, he could only creep home, a lost soul, and seek his wife's forgiveness.

Willy Loman in "The Death of a Salesman" and Blanche in "A Streetcar Named Desire" and a dozen others are examples of lost souls on the stages of our theaters and in our motion pictures.

This matter of lostness touches every one of us. There are so many ways in which people can get lost.

So the good news of these parables is for all of us. These two parables tell of the seeking love of God which will not give up anyone for lost. This love of God, expressed most completely in the birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, will seek and search to find us and anyone else who is lost. God's love is such that it will seek after us forever and never give up. No matter how worthless we might seem to ourselves or others, God does not see us that way.

What does it feel like when one knows he or she is "found"?

To be found is to know deep down that one is connected to God and to others. One can then say, "I am in tune with the rhythm of the universe. I have committed my whole self to a power greater than my own, so that when my very humanity makes mistakes inevitable, I can know

that someone is helping me carry the load of it. Thus while I seem to be alone in the world, I am actually never alone."

How then does God seek and find the lost? Some months ago, a young man who regularly attends church here sent me this story.

One spring, during heavy rains, a dike on the river began to leak badly, and it was reported that it would certainly give out completely within the next 24 hours. The town downstream was evacuated. The National Guard then began to search the town, now flooded, to be sure that no one was left behind.

Two of the guardsmen came upon a man who was standing on his porch with water up to his knees. They asked him to get into their boat before the flood became worse. He refused by saying, "I will stay here. God has promised to take care of me."

A few hours later, the man was on the roof of his house because the flood had increased, and again they urged him to get into their boat lest he be swept away by the flood. And again, he refused by saying, "God has promised to take care of me."

Sometime later, when the flood had increased, and the man was now hanging on for his life, a helicopter flew over and spotted the man. A rope was lowered to him so that he could be rescued. But once more he refused, stating that God would save him.

Not long after, he drowned. When this man arrived in God's presence, he let God know how disappointed he was because God had not saved him. He told God, "You promised to take care of me." God's reply was, "You fool. I sent you two boats and a helicopter."

God frequently works through other human beings. That's the main reason for the existence of the church. It is described in the New Testament as the "Body of Christ" alive and at work in the world. We, who are the church, are to seek out and find the lost as Jesus did.

The "Friend to Friend" program we have in this congregation, our letting the building be used by support groups like A.A. and many others, all are ways of helping to find the lost.

I recently read of a small group of Christians who, as volunteers, are visiting terminally ill AIDS patients in a hospital in a large city. None of the victims have families in the area and certainly no visitors. So this group brings them postage stamps, stationery, books, tapes, and cookies. They are letting these outcasts know that God loves them.

The prison fellowship program, started by Charles Colson, is another way of seeking the lost and bringing God's love to them.

A vital church is a seeking church — a church that is always reaching out beyond its own boundaries. A vital church is like the shepherd who searched for the lost sheep and the woman who looked and looked for the lost coin.

And then another miracle happens. When we as Christians begin to seek out the lost, we are ourselves found by God's love. Then God's Spirit truly becomes active in us. Someone put it this way—"Love starts when another person's needs become more important than your own."

That’s why Jesus said, “Those who seek to save their lives shall lose them, but those who lose their lives for my sake will find them.” Look about you to discover the spontaneously happy persons. They are the ones who give away the most. They never seem to have much need for attention. They have got themselves off their hands.

And notice what else happens when we seek out the lost and find them. Not only are we ourselves found, but incredible joy for all of us is the result. As far as God is concerned, the last word is not sinning or even self-denial, the last word is joy. The party begins when the lost are found. These parables tell us that the party is everywhere — there is joy in the presence of God when even one lost person is found. This joy is for all of us, the lost and the found. Amen.