Sunday, September 17, 1995
GRUMBLING OR REJOICING
Luke 15:1-10

Some years back, when my dad was still alive and I hadn't been able to visit him for several months, I arrived at his house and I could see that he was very happy about something. Before I could even ask, he said, "Have you heard the good news?" "No," I replied, "What good news?"
"I found my teeth," he said. I told him that I didn't know they were lost. "Oh yes," he said, "They've been lost for more than a month, and we've been searching this house over and over again. Then two days ago, Bonnie (my stepmother) went to the closet to put on a pair of shoes she hadn't worn for some time, and she couldn't get one on. When she looked inside, there were my false teeth."
"How did they get inside one of her shoes?" I asked. "Here's what I think happened," my dad explained, "Because the teeth don't fit very well, I often take them out and put them in my shirt pocket. I probably went to get something out of the closet one day, and when I bent over, my teeth fell out of my pocket into one of Bonnie's shoes, and I wasn't aware of it."

In the scripture reading today, Jesus told two short parables about something being lost, an intense search undertaken, and what has been lost is found. In the first instance, it is a sheep, and in the second, a coin. In each case, 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 enormous value, and after a long search, when we found what had been lost, we were relieved and delighted. It's a cause for celebration. Every now and then, we read or hear in the news about a child being lost and a wide search is organized, and then, if the lost child is found, there is almost no end to the joy that is experienced.

Jesus told these stories because his critics were not rejoicing but were grumbling and complaining. Why? Because he was spending too much time seeking out and welcoming into his presence sinners and other people who were considered to be lost and not worth finding. He not only spent time with them, but he ate with them in their homes, and to eat with someone in that culture was to treat them as equals.

In every society throughout history and even today, there are people who are considered by others to be so lost that they are not worth saving—so lost that we consider it a waste of time trying to find them, and we certainly wouldn't consider celebrating if they were found. Like the critics of Jesus, too many among us grumble and complain when the lost are being sought and do not rejoice when they are found.

It was in response to such grumbling that Jesus told the stories about the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep to search and find the one lost sheep and the woman who had lost one coin out of ten and her search until she found it. Then they called all their friends together for a celebration because the lost had been found.

What's the message of these two little short parables for us?
First of all, they portray a different picture of God than many people have in mind. The shepherd and the woman are metaphors for God. These stories proclaim the seeking love of God, which does not give up on anyone as lost. This love of God will seek and search for the lost forever if necessary.

Not only that, God takes the initiative. The coin didn't know it was lost. The sheep didn't know it was lost. This changes the order of things. The way we usually operate is a person repents; we respond with forgiveness. God, however, tries to find us before we are even aware we are lost.

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 very prudent person. 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 seeks all people, no matter how lost or how worthless they may seem to us. And this love of God never gives up until the lost are found. Jesus said over and over again, "I have come to seek and to save those who are lost."

Why does God do this? Because each human being is a child of God and therefore has absolute worth in God's domain—even those that we or the society in which we live may consider not worth looking for or trying to find because they have little or no worth.

This is a hard lesson for us to learn. It's so difficult for us to believe that with God, possibilities exist which we are unable even to imagine; that even people we hate are worthy of love; that even those who disagree with us may be right.

Now, let's attempt to make these two parables contemporary. Who are some of the lost in our time? Who do we grumble about?

From the point of view of many in our society, those who have AIDS are lost, and not much time or energy should be spent in trying to help them. For many people, they are the modern-day lepers. Yet I'm sure Jesus would seek them out and accept them as having worth as children of God and expects us to do the same.

A second group of people that many consider lost are those who are in jail or prison. It's difficult to find volunteers to work with people in prison or even visit them. Yet Jesus, in another one of his parables, said that when we visit those in prison, it's the same as visiting him.

A third category of people that some consider lost are those who live in poverty and those who are homeless. Single parents are sometimes put into the "lost" column.

Strangely enough, many of us who are members or who attend a church like this one are considered by people in other churches as being lost. Ironically too, within the Christian community with all of its divisions, there are those who would gladly eat a meal with you or me in our homes or in their homes or in a restaurant but would not be able, according to some church doctrine, to eat with us together at the Lord's Table in our congregation or we with them in their church community.

So, there are lots of lost people in our society. I'm sure you can think of other categories of people who are considered lost and not worth finding.

Yet if we want to be brutally honest about it, is there anyone here or who is listening 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. Perhaps you felt disconnected

and therefore completely alone, or you were confused, perplexed, or maybe 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 has been lost. 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, to find our way. Some among us get lost in the jungles of passion, hatred, and vengeance, and then we are unable to see others as they are. We are not able 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.

There are those who are lost in an addiction to alcohol or drugs. Others get lost in defeat or disappointment. Some get lost in middle age and see no more challenge in life and want to give up. And sometimes we get lost in our ambition to get ahead and sell our souls in the process. People who lose their jobs frequently feel lost, and some who retire know how it feels to be lost.

Sometimes we get lost by gradually wandering off course without being aware of it. A farmer was looking for a lost cow. A city man asked him how it got lost. “They nibble themselves lost,” said the farmer. “They keep their heads down, wander from one green tuft of pasture to another, come to a hole in the fence, and never can find a hole by which to get back in again.”

We know how God takes the initiative in seeking the lost. What then does God expect us to do? God wants us as individuals and as church congregations to be “seeker-friendly,” to take the initiative.

Today, as one example of seeking out and helping the lost, we are highlighting our participation as a church congregation in HABITAT FOR HUMANITY. Our goal during the coming year, beginning with today, is to build one house. This requires us to raise a minimum of $40,000 in cash and in addition, we will be needing a lot of volunteer labor. The committee heading up this project will be giving you the many details in the coming weeks and months. There are many ways in which each one of us can participate. It’s up to you to decide what you can do. The good thing is, instead of grumbling and complaining because some people don’t have decent homes, we are instead helping people fulfill their dreams and then rejoicing because the lost have been found.

One reason I’m so proud of this congregation is that throughout its history, it has been a “seeker-friendly” church by taking the initiative. Almost 50 years ago, this church began its radio ministry. It was and continues to be a way of seeking out people who cannot physically be here on Sunday mornings and of reaching those who might be willing to be present in person because they first heard the worship service on the radio.

Eight years ago, when we began our television ministry, it was and continues to be another way to reach out to people instead of waiting for them to find us. The name of the program was purposely chosen to express this: REACH OUT AND LIVE. The letters we receive each week tell us that we are finding the lost.

The Lied Organ Project is yet another example of our being a Seeker Friendly Church. The only reason the trustee of the Lied Foundation Trust agreed to make a major gift for this project is because we were able to demonstrate how this instrument is going to help find those who are lost.

Our weekday Preschool/Discovery Day program, Parent's Day Out, the Sunday Church School, Vacation Church School in the summer, the Youth Ministry, Women's Ministries, and countless other programs which I don't have time to mention—all are a part of trying to reach people who are lost in one way or another.

A vital church, an alive church, is a seeking church—a church that is always reaching out beyond its own boundaries.

And then another miracle happens. When we begin to seek out the lost, we are found by God's love. That's why Jesus said, "Those who seek to save their lives shall lose them, but those who lose their lives will find them." Look around you to discover the joyful people. They are the ones who give of themselves the most.

And notice what else happens when we seek out the lost and find them. Not only do we find our true selves as well, 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 joy is everywhere—there is joy in the presence of God when even one lost person is found. Which will you choose, grumbling or rejoicing? Amen.