Year C, Proper 19

Exodus 32:7-14

Psalm 51:1-11

Luke 15:1-10

**To Be Found**

The Rev. Nathan Bourne

I’ve spent a lot of my life searching for things.

I’ve searched for a college,

Searched for jobs,

apartments,

Roommates.

I’ve searched for shirts to buy,

Shoes to wear,

Suits that fit.

I’ve searched for books to read,

Games to play,

Things to watch,

And ways to fill the time.

I’ve searched for lost keys,

Lost pens,

Lost books,

Lost money.

I spent about thirty minutes a couple nights ago,

Searching for a pair of lost headphones.

And then there are the less tangible things—

I’ve searched for friends,

Searched for love,

Searched for a place to fit in.

I’ve searched for words to say,

A name for a feeling,

And ways to describe myself.

I’ve searched for a good turn of phrase,

Clever sentences,

And desperately searched for ideas for sermons.

I’ve searched for meaning,

For answers to why something happened,

For hope.

I’ve searched for clarity,

For signs

For guidance

For direction.

I’ve searched for signs that the best friend I lost is still with me,

And searched for someone to share my grief with.

I’ve searched for God in the midst of tragedy.

I’ve searched for certainty that God is there

At the other end of my prayers.

Searching has been one of my life’s great activities.

And it’s not just me.

On average we spend 2.5 days a year looking for lost items.

Over our lifetime that’s about six full months.

Maybe you’ve already had to search for something today—

The socks you were going to wear,

The keys you didn’t put in the place where you always put them,

Your checkbook.

The odds are not in your favor.

To see how much searching we do,

You can also look to Google.

An average person conducts 3-4 searches per day.

Google handles 63,000 searches per second—

That’s more than 55 billion a day,

And over 2 trillion a year.

It took at least three Google searches,

Just to find all these numbers.

All this is to say,

I think we can all relate to the characters

From our Gospel reading today,

And the searches they go on.

Jesus is at a meal with his disciples,

A group of “sinners and tax collectors”,

And some grumbling Pharisees and Scribes.

In response to a comment about the company he keeps,

Jesus responds with two interrelated parables.

In the first we hear about a shepherd out tending a large flock

When somehow he realizes that one of the hundred are missing

(how you manage to count a hundred sheep and feel certain

You’re one short is beyond me).

The shepherd leaves the whole flock—

The 99 sheep still under his care—

To find the one.

He takes a huge risk and leaves the rest of the flock,

To seek out the one stray, wandering sheep.

Jesus asks the question—

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”

The answer should be “None of us!”

To leave the 99 to find the one is ridiculous.

No one hearing the parable would think it was worth the risk.

But for the shepherd in the story,

And for Jesus,

It’s worth every bit of it.

The second parable mirrors the action of the first.

A woman with ten silver coins loses one.

She puts down everything she’s doing,

Lights a lamp,

And searches everywhere for the one coin.

Again, there’s an overwhelming sense that what is lost needs to be found.

What motivates the shepherd and the woman to search so fervently for what they’ve lost?

Why is it that when I’ve misplaced something,

I can’t let go of it until I’ve found it?

I think at the heart of the shepherd’s searching,

And so much of our own,

Is a desire for completeness.

It’s not necessarily about the one sheep or the one coin,

But about having the whole 100 and the whole 10.

Both of them are motivated by a sense that something is missing,

That the flock is incomplete.

So many of my searches have been about a desire for something to be complete.

Finding the right job,

The right partner,

The right college,

The right place to live,

The right group of friends,

All of it has been motivated,

By a desire to be whole.

I just need to find what’s missing,

And I’ll be complete—

Life will be easier,

I’ll be happier

And more fulfilled.

But somehow it never seems to work out that way.

While I can relate to the searching of the shepherd and the woman,

Their reaction to finding what they’re looking for

Feels over the top.

Once they find what is lost,

Each of them immediately call their friends together to rejoice with them.

I think I’d be embarrassed that I lost the sheep or the coin in the first place.

My first response wouldn’t be to call everyone I know and throw a party.

I think it’s important here to look at what Jesus means by the parable.

While each parable invites a host of interpretations,

The one we get from Luke’s Gospel

Asks us to put ourselves in the place of the sheep or the coin,

To see ourselves as the one who is lost.

It’s harder for me to imagine myself as a sheep or a coin,

But I think the focus of the parables are on the one doing the searching.

So often we talk about our faith

Or our spiritual lives,

As our search for God,

For truth,

For self-awareness,

Or a deeper connection to the universe.

What does it do to that picture

If we think about God in search of us?

I think the heart of the parables is this—

It’s not up to us to find God.

As much as we may be searching for God

Or desire to have a relationship with God,

God is in search of us.

God wants a relationship with us,

And will show up in our lives

To invite us into that relationship.

God will reveal Godself in the people and world around us.

Like the sheep or the coin,

We are being sought after.

God is eager to show us the love

That God showed in the act of creation,

The love God showed to Jesus when God spoke to him,

“You are my Son, my beloved.”

God is pursuing a relationship with us.

I find that to be an incredibly comforting thought.

It’s liberating.

If it were up to me to find God,

To know who and where God is,

The chances of me getting it right are pretty slim.

But with God searching for me,

I know that even when I don’t realize that I’m lost,

I have a chance of being found.

No matter what we’ve done,

The people we’ve hurt,

The ways we’ve disappointed ourselves and others,

Or the ways we’ve fallen short,

God is still saving a seat at the table,

Searching for us to bring us in,

To welcome us with open arms,

And rejoice that we’ve come home.

Just as the sheep belongs in the flock,

And the coin belongs in the purse,

We belong to the family of God.

Without us,

There is an empty seat,

A seat that God wants to be filled.

God wants us to be found.

I’ve been thinking about the times in my life when I’ve been lost—

Those times I didn’t know where I was

Or where I was going,

When I didn’t know what I wanted,

And didn’t have a clear sense of purpose.

They’re mostly times when I was searching for something,

But didn’t know what I was searching for.

About seven years ago

I was backpacking in the Caucasus mountains of Georgia.

All I brought to eat was a few granola bars I still had from home,

And a couple loaves of bread I bought at a market on the way to the trail.

I was woefully underprepared.

By the end of the first day,

I had eaten much of that food.

I woke up that second morning,

Not knowing how I would make it to my destination.

I started the steepest climb of the trek,

Up the face of Lomis Mta,

Lion mountain.

A few times I lost the trail,

As it followed and diverged from the cow paths also making their way

Up the mountain.

Finally the trail cleared the tree line,

And before me opened up a subalpine meadow,

The light green grass framed by the dark green of firs on peaks in the distance.

As I continued up towards a small stone chapel at the top of the ridge,

I came across a group of men leading horses along.

The first man I came up to was like something out of a Russian novel—

Stockily built, dressed in a rough-spun wool sweater,

And leading a muscular white horse—

When I tried to speak to him,

he just mumbled something barely decipherable.

He walked behind me as I moved towards the church.

Near the entrance another man met me,

Went into the church with me,

And handed me a couple candles to light before the icons

Of Mary and other saints,

To let my prayers rise from the mountain.

As I came out, the two men and a couple who looked younger than me

Signaled for me to come over to them.

Through a series of gestures

And broken phrases of Georgian and Russian,

They invited me to come to the shack where they stayed,

When they were up on the mountain tending cattle.

Having no reason not to,

I joined them.

When we got to the cabin,

They laid out a simple

But abundant feast—

Sliced fresh tomatoes,

cucumbers,

And cheese,

bread baked a couple days earlier.

Then out came the bottles of wine they brought with them.

We sat down to this feast

And started talking.

Only one of them knew any Russian,

And I knew next to no Georgian.

But by the end of it,

We were laughing with one another,

And none of us wanted to leave.

I went to those mountains in search of something—

Solace,

Connection,

Rootedness.

I don’t know what I was looking for,

But I know that in the course of that meal,

I was found.

I was found by those four cattle herders.

And I can’t help but think of that feast,

When I read about the shepherd and the woman

Rejoicing over what they found,

And inviting all their friends to sit and eat.

That meal on a Georgian mountaintop

Is the best vision I have for the kingdom of God,

Where God and the whole heavenly host

Will rejoice over each person who is found,

and brought in to sit and eat.

God is actively seeking us,

Inviting us into God’s love.

When we are the most lost,

Whether we know it or not,

God will be there to lead us back home,

To bring us back into the flock,

And to rejoice that we have returned.

No matter how far astray we may have wandered.

We will continue to make mistakes,

To fall short,

To hurt the people we love.

We’re human—

Imperfect,

Flawed,

Limited.

As hard as we try,

We’re going to mess up.

The comforting thing I find in today’s Gospel,

Is the reminder

That we don’t have to find our way back towards God alone.

God will be there to walk with us on the journey.

God’s love will be there to light the path

And carry us back home,

To the place where our searching meets God’s,

Where we will know

That we are loved with a love that passes all understanding.

I pray that we will be able to receive that love,

That we will be open to being found,

And that in being found,

The love of God will transform us,

So that we can share it with a world that desperately needs it.