

Lost and Found

I worked in many different school buildings throughout my teaching career, as well as in a few churches. The one thing that all of these places have in common is a “lost and found” area. Have you ever had the opportunity to look through a lost and found area in an elementary school or middle school? We have seen electronics, eyeglasses, cleats, earphones, winter coats, sweatshirts, sneakers, mittens, gloves, hats, etc. We have even had socks in there. I often wondered why parents didn’t check or have their kids check lost and found, especially when they came home without the winter coat they left with that very morning.

Most schools will send out a notice that the lost and found items will be on display during a parent-teacher conference time before things are donated to a thrift shop, etc. Mostly, though, the parents were thrilled when their “lost” items had been “found.” I’d like to be a fly on the wall for some of those conversations that I hope happened at home afterwards.

We have all lost things. Some of us have lost certain abilities as we've grown older, we lost people in our lives—through death, the end of a relationship, or those who have moved away from us. Maybe some people have even lost a part of or all of their faith in God. Some may have lost it for a while and then came back to it, while others haven't gone to the "lost and found" area of their hearts to retrieve it.

How do people lose their faith? I think it depends on the person and their circumstances. Some people go through a crisis over the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the end of a relationship, and a host of other reasons. "How could God allow this to happen? How can I have this faith if God has taken this person or this thing away from me?" Those are some pretty tough things to go through.

At other times, we lose things and don't even realize they are gone. Then, one day, we discover what we have lost. Perhaps there was a time when you were away from the church or had stopped praying. Some have found their way back to God, while others need to take more time. Sometimes we may even settle for what is not wholeness and say, "Eh, it will be alright."

Contrary to popular belief, the church is not for saints. The saints don't need a church; those who are lost need someone to help them be found. Go back to the beginning of the Gospel reading today. The Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling about Jesus' choices of social companions. Jesus saw this as a "teachable moment" for not only the sinners and tax collectors, but for the Pharisees and scribes as well.

The parables helped to explain things for the sinners and tax collectors, as they could be brought back in without fear of punishment from God. Jesus wanted them to know that if they turned their lives around, the heavens would rejoice and they'd truly be welcomed into the reign of God. Remember, tax collectors were mostly Jewish men who had been hired by the Romans to collect taxes among their "own kind." They had to make sure that they turned in what was due, but could keep anything that was left over. Because of this, the tax collectors usually demanded more than was truly taxed.

The Pharisees and scribes needed to hear this because while they were busy keeping their "exemplary" lives, they needed to hear that the reign of God was for all, regardless of their status. They were so

worried about following every rule and regulation, turning their noses up on those who failed to do so, and then assessing fines or other penalties that they forgot what it meant to work to save those who needed it, to find those who were lost, and to bring them back.

It is up to all of us to find those who are lost and to give the message that they are welcome to be “found.” Before we can truly do that, I think we are all called to be like the woman with the lost coin and sweep out our own “homes” to look for things that may have been lost or keep us from being completely found. Then, we can go about the work of finding those lost sheep, welcoming them back into the fold, and rejoicing because they have found their way back to God.

We may look like a lost and found bin in a school or church, filled with all kinds of people who may have been discarded by others, or simply forgotten. Our church may be filled with sinners, tax collectors, or their equivalent today. We rejoice with God and the company of angels in heaven as we collectively cheer, “You were lost but now you’re found.” It may not be in a way that we even expect it. Look for

the lost sheep. Sweep to find that lost coin. Bring them in so we can all rejoice in that company. Amen.