

*15Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3So he told them this parable: 4"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? 5When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 10Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

Storm clouds were gathering in the west, in an hour or so tornadoes would be roaring across nearby fields. But Karen's keys were missing and those who were left at the church picnic were all searching. I remember straining to see keys in the grass. Ranging far and wide- asking Karen where she had been – where they might have been dropped – and all the while sensing the gathering fury of the storm. I was ready to give up – I suspect others were also but some were still looking so I walked the ground I had searched twice already. No keys. Had Karen not found them in her purse I imagine we would be looking still. Well, no. There comes a time when what is lost is lost.

I remember the night we were looking for Hannah. Inside the church, in every cupboard and closet, in every room we looked. Under the pews, behind the choir robes, high and low we looked. Outside I remember Wayne Satterfield pushing his way through the shrubs and bushes. Flashlights shone in every possible place, more people coming to join the search, every place searched by every set of eyes for Hannah must be found. She could not be lost. Never that night would anyone say, "What is lost is lost." Then Mario – with a principal's insight thought to follow the road to grandmother's house and found Hannah. And the relief and the rejoicing flowed through us all, thinking of that night I can feel it still.

Our gospel reading begins with these words, “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus.” Not found as yet, but still very much lost they were curious. Jesus shared his words with them, he broke bread with them – these lost ones. They were coming near to him – near to being found.

But some Pharisees and scribes thought it was time to call off the search. They grumbled, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Sinners they were in the Pharisees’ minds and sinners they would always be – what is lost is lost – forever lost as far as the Pharisees and scribes were concerned.

I suppose I was thinking like them as she approached our table. Her arms and legs were marked with tattoos – every free space marked with tattoos. And eyebrows and tongue and ears and nose and lips crowded with piercings – studs and rings of silver attached everywhere. Had she not been our waitress she would have been labeled, “Lost!” in my mind. But her gentle spirit and her kindness were evident in her serving. It would not be difficult to think of her as the one sheep the shepherd leaves the flock to find, or the coin the woman rejoices to find.

But with him it was different. He had been a pimp, a black man with two young white girls – one on either arm. As he told me this he watched my eyes to see how I would react. They worked for him as prostitutes – he was rolling in the dough, he bragged. What shepherd would leave the flock behind for him – what woman would throw a party when he was saved?

Let’s face it – there are sinners and then there are sinners. I don’t know about you but I know when I have given up the search for a lost one. As it was with the keys, sometimes there is a limit as to how much searching I am willing to do. My heart tells me that some people are so lost that it is not worth wasting even the smallest effort on them. For the Pharisees, the tax collectors and sinners were lost like that. But not for Jesus.

Could every lost one be as precious to God as Hannah is to her grandmother, Doris? Could it be as inconceivable to Jesus that anyone would be lost as it was inconceivable to us that Hannah could be lost? And do relief and rejoicing flow through the being of God when a lost one is found? Jesus says so.

The night Hannah was lost no one needed to be told, “You must join the search.” As soon as people found out she was missing they searched with all their heart and power. But if that night there had been a hundred young girls missing – a thousand – ten thousand – would we have soon been overwhelmed? Is that why in so many ways the people of God have given up the search altogether? Or limit the search to the nearest and dearest?

Jesus does not give up. I think that you and I know that about ourselves – we might not be here today if we did not. You and I hope that Jesus will never give up on the ones we love – especially those who are struggling. But many of them out there we have given up on. Some even in the church we give up on – stop caring about, stop trying to reach, stop inviting. I suspect many of us will never overcome that.

Maybe with some the best we can do is to remember Jesus has not given up on them, every time we look at them, to remember. Amen.

