

“Parables of the Prodigal God” based on Luke 15:1-2, 8-10
Preached by Rev. Jonathan New
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To begin this sermon I need a few things from some of you... [Keys, wallet, watch, and a purse are gathered from some worshippers.]

You’ve probably noticed I’ve been obsessed with treasure as a spiritual metaphor. I’ve referenced Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* that speaks of the map that sends its characters on their adventures: “three crosses of red ink,” one highlighted by the words, “Bulk of treasure here.” Well, you may find it odd to hear a grown man confess to having pirate-like fantasies. But, fact is, treasure hunting’s on the rise. Why not? After all, you don’t need to sail thousands of miles away to seek treasures because, only 100 yards from where I’m standing, treasure is waiting to be found.

Some of you with a GPS unit know what I’m talking about. People have been burying treasure, enticing others to find it. These hiders and seekers are playing a fast-growing game — Geocaching — treasure-hunting that uses a Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver to locate hidden containers called “caches.” GPS units use satellite technology to plot our position to three meters accuracy. Participants visit websites listing Geocache coordinates for caches and, after deciding on one to seek, plot a route that will hopefully take them to the treasure — typically a waterproof box containing a logbook, pen or pencil, assorted bits and pieces, often relating to the area, and sometimes more or less valuable items. That makes Geocaching into a true high-tech treasure hunt. No one knows exactly how many people have taken up Geocaching. But I can tell you that in 2000, there were 75 caches hidden. Today, there are more than 1.6 million; dozens of them within a quarter mile radius of this spot!

Well, I don’t know what Jesus would say about people foregoing Sabbath worship for a Sunday-morning geocaching trip, but I expect he would have appreciated the geocachers’ persistence in trying to locate their treasure. After all, in the scripture we heard today from Luke, Jesus praised another undaunted searcher after treasure.

The context of Luke 15 is crucial: grumbling because Jesus was associating with “undesireables.” So, Jesus tells three parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. He shows what he is doing and what God is up to — ministering to the “lost” — by putting us in God’s position.

For example... A woman’s lost one of ten silver coins, a drachma, a laborer’s day wage. Now, if you’ve only got ten coins to start, losing one is serious business. But there may be more at stake. Scholars believe the parable describes a woman wearing silver coins as part of a headdress. Even today in the Middle East, such a coin-adorned headdress is either a dowry or a gift presented by the bridegroom’s family to the bride. This is the bride’s personal property, indicating her financial status and serving as a “safety net” in time of need. This one coin isn’t only valuable but meaningful to her. This is why she’s so urgent to find it.

Now, geocachers are in it for the challenge. But — imagine! — as the woman, your motivation is to retrieve something already precious to you. So you tear the place apart to find your lost treasure. You light a lamp, sweep every inch of the hard-packed dirt floor. When you do find it you’re so overjoyed you call in the neighbors to celebrate. It’s a startling image. God as a woman would have shocked the Pharisees and scribes. More shocking is the idea that we’re such a precious treasure to God that God will go to any lengths to seek us out when we’re lost.

Now, we may wonder why the woman didn't keep better track of her money, especially if she had so little. After all, we take precautions to keep our things safe: hidden belts for our money; back-up systems for our computers; invisible fences for our pets; GPS units to help us keep track of ourselves. Even so, we know what it means to lose our valuables. I put down my keys, and when I need to run out on an errand, they're not on their usual hook. I can never seem to find the TV remote. The keyless entry device on my key ring breaks and I no longer have that chirping and flashing of lights that helps me remember where I've parked my car. And even the miracle of GPS devices has been diminished lately by stories of drivers in Vermont who've got into trouble when they blindly followed their GPS units down streets that diminished into muddy footpaths, and roads that led onto deep-laden snowmobile routes. Those fancy gadgets are only as accurate as the map information that's supplied to them.

Those of you I took things from at the beginning of the sermon, how does it feel to be without them? [Answers received.] I just recently had my wallet stolen. What a nasty feeling! Money, credit cards, driver's license, medical cards — taken from me. Now, all of you, recall a time when you lost something you valued, through theft, misplacement, accident, or death. It's hard to remember those losses, whatever they are. It's painful, even if we're not talking about the loss of another person. Because whenever we lose something that's meaningful to us there's grief involved.

Now, shift back to the parable and recall the woman. Such grief over this valued possession she's lost is what moves her to frantic search. Jesus wanted us to know that God grieves as well. As in the parable of the Prodigal Son, we're God's own children; that's why God searches for us. [Items returned to worshippers.] Now, how does it feel to have them back?

Are we ready to accept we're that precious to God? To accept a God who seeks us, even before we turn to God? After all, these days we emphasize finding ourselves. We see ourselves as the seekers, not God.

Personally, I welcome such a God, because I know I need to be found. Feeling uncertain about my future, fearing the effects the economy may have on my family, grappling with life-threatening illness, facing the unalterable changes involved with aging — this and more can make me feel lost. Even if I had a kind of spiritual GPS it wouldn't help me with this kind of lostness. Like its high-tech counterpart, it might help me figure out where I am when I'm lost, but I'd still be stuck in the middle of nowhere.

And are we willing to live such prodigal love? That third story Jesus told we call the Parable of the Prodigal son. Well, the son was prodigal — extravagant to a degree bordering on recklessness. Yet all three parables present God as one who seeks out the lost and who's so overjoyed when the lost one is found that God throws a party — a prodigally loving God. I praise this congregation for organized ourselves, devoting staff time, committing dollars, and joining efforts so those who feel lost might know again what it means to be found — the ways we've reflected and made real God's prodigal love. And I commend you for discerning together what our response will be when people who feel themselves to be lost, and who've heard that churches like ours — open-handed, open-minded, open-hearted — are as compassionate as Jesus was, arrive at our door. Asking whether they'll find us “as advertised,” really welcoming, really making a place for them alongside us, and if our own prodigal love might prompt us to go even further — finding creative ways to seek them out?

The good news is God doesn't just find us; God joins us. God's sweeping for us. Like the woman of Jesus' story — willing to kick up some dust and brush us clean, and pick us up out of

the dirt, to restore us to our proper place — with God. Let us praise this God who loves us so extravagantly, and who graciously makes the first move to bring us home. And — remembering the many souls among and around us who feel lost — may we also remember our call to persistently seek them through intentional acts of justice and deeds of loving-kindness.