

*Lost and Found*  
from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Reading: Luke 15:1-10

September 12, 2010  
Homecoming Sunday

There is a reason that solitary confinement in a prison is considered an extreme and unhealthy environment. Being isolated from others causes the mind and imagination to begin flights of thought that soon cause the person to become unhinged. This is much more than solitude which, for awhile, can be restorative and comforting for mind and spirit. Isolation is different. It is a radical cutoff from associates and friends and family. It is often the experience of the homeless and it is one of the reasons that mental illness is high among those without a home. We can endure isolation for a time, especially if we have a reason to be hopeful, but after a week or so the isolation begins to have a deteriorating effect. One thinks of heroic survivors of limited isolation and we are struck by

their strength and their fragile condition: Col. Nicolson in the screenplay of *The Bridge On the River Kwai*, or the young imprisoned banker in Stephen King's story, *The Shawshank Redemption*. Each survives because he is able to take redeeming elements of the community in his mind into the most isolated cell.

## I

If given a choice, most of us will choose community over isolation. We know that we need to be with others in order to maintain some modicum of mental health. Even an isolated lost sheep, the one outside the camp of the famous ninety-nine, is so affected by the isolation that he cannot even utter a bleating cry for help. He has nibbled his way along one grazing area after another until he has become distant and separated from the community. He needs the community of others and they are not complete without him.

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Robert McAfee Brown, a theologian/hero of mine from past years, had a finely honed sense of humor, a very useful gift sometimes in anxious times, especially in the church. He wrote a little book

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Russell Bowie, *The Compassionate Christ: Reflections from the Gospel of Luke* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1965) p.204.

about the significance of the church when he was a young man with young children. It was a time when they read a lot of children's literature together. He reminds us about a "Mysterious Message" left under Winnie-the-Pooh's front door: "I AM SCERCHING FOR A NEW HOUSE FOR OWL SO HAD YOU RABBIT."<sup>2</sup>

Winnie-the-Pooh's friends in the wood know something about community that we forget at our own peril: *We desperately need one another. We watch out for one another because we care about the other as friend and fellow traveler. Some of are better at taking care of ourselves than others and none of us is complete apart from the community. That is why home and coming home is so important. Home gives us life. Apart from home we slowly die.*

Some of us absorb this truth about home and community through our family as though by osmosis. Others of us are not so quick to get it and need more time. One who seems to have lived always in support of community is a friend in Maine named Amy Preston. She and her husband, Mike, own the Alna Store, which is one third store and two thirds café. More important it is the community center, because of them. The day before we left Maine to return to Bryn

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<sup>2</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *The Significance of the Church* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1956)p. 15.

Mawr we treated ourselves to one last breakfast at the Alna Store. Mike was there but Amy was not. She had had a long night he said, taking care of the ninety-nine year old lady across the road from the store. Amy takes this neighbor her meals each day. The woman has cancer and is trying to die while under the care of a hospice team. Amy is the one they call in the middle of the night when they need additional help. Last night had been one of those nights.

By the time we finished breakfast and had a closing visit with Mike, Amy arrived looking groomed and fresh. It was hard to believe that she had been up since 1:00 AM. Her friend was dying yet her attention was on us, the summer people preparing to return to Pennsylvania. Where, I wondered, does this woman get her energy? What is it that makes her spirit sing? I know the answer, as well as you do, but I am reluctant to admit it. I enjoy being the occasional curmudgeon too much to give it up completely, something Amy moved past a long time ago. Somewhere, sometime in her past she learned **the secret to hospitality: it is a posture, not just an act.** It is the orientation of your spirit toward others. Pooh's friend, Rabbit, knew this and it is the very reason he was helping Owl "scerch" for a new house when his was no longer suitable.

## II

If our basic posture is oriented to others we will, without even thinking about it, look for ways to make them a part of our community. If one of our own is “lost” there is need for strong direction toward being “found.” Sometimes this is accomplished by the Amys among us. Sometimes people find their own way back where they can be found. And sometimes only God can bring that lost one back into the fold. By whatever means, when this return, this “being found” occurs, we are led to believe that there is great rejoicing in heaven. *God is less than complete when we are apart from the community.* That is an unmistakable emphasis of the three parables that open the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke’s gospel: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son.

Now, if we were good Episcopalians worshipping, say, in the little church Marty and I attend in Maine the sermon would end about here, we would sing a hymn and then go to the rail for communion. But you are not so fortunate this morning. You have chosen to come home to Bryn Mawr, a Presbyterian church with a preacher who

thinks he still has time to make one more observation about the text before he quits.

### III

It is our tradition to look realistically at both the lighter, easy-to-swallow dimension of the gospel as well as the darker, more difficult to digest dimension. In today's text we resonate to the emphasis on those who are lost being found and the great joy that spreads throughout heaven when one is returned to the fold and turns his or her life around. We know it is a two-way street in which both God and the Amy Prestons of the world are active. We like the happy ending in which the lost are found and can imagine how it must feel to be that lamb spread across the shoulders of the shepherd who will take him home. We like to be given attention and, like that elder brother in the story of the prodigal, the lost son, we want to pout when we don't get the attention we believe we deserve. We like to feel we are each important. We like being the object of someone's pursuit of us. We want to be "found." But this is not the only role available. We are not always lost lambs. We are sometimes needed as shepherds, helping others find their way home.

The text does not quite say to us, at that point, suck it up and get on with it anyway, but it comes close. The “grown-up” dimension of these stories, the responsible Presbyterian emphasis if you insist, is that we are both among the found and those who search. Indeed, we are now, or have been in the past, those whom Jesus has sought and brought home. And, because that has happened, we are now in a position to be among those who go out, open the gate, running to greet the one who was lost and has now returned. We are to be like that shepherd who goes after the 100<sup>th</sup> sheep and like the woman who searches for the lost coin that represents enough to keep her in food and shelter for several months. We are called to what Antoinette Wire has called in her commentary on the parables, “the adventure of the risky, Christlike life.”<sup>3</sup>

If Pooh’s friends in the wood can figure this out, and if a hostess/owner of a rural café can figure this out, surely we who call ourselves students of the scriptures and the heirs of John Calvin can go deeply into this text and come up with an agenda for our own exercise of hospitality. There are still a lot of lost sheep out there and

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<sup>3</sup> Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Parable is a Mirror* (General Assembly Mission Board, Atlanta) p.53.

not a few lost sons and daughters. They need to be found and we are the ones, with God's help, to find them and bring them home. When that has happened, and not until that "scerch" has been completed, the community is not whole. This is responsible work for grown-ups in a world of people who often act as though they are as lost as confused children.

So, welcome home to the faith community that is Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. In the providence of God we have been found and are already engaged in finding others who remain outside the fold for a multitude of reasons. We know what it is to be a found sheep and we know what it means to be a shepherd who finds others. Our lives are a combination of being lost and found but we have learned that the greatest reward comes in being among the found.

Thanks be to God.

Now I'm going to ask you to do something for me as the introduction to the hymn begins. I'm going to ask you to stand and turn to your neighbors saying, "Welcome home. May the peace of God be with us all."