

WHAT ABOUT THE LOST? Cherishing and Finding the Missing

Think with me about the “lost,” and excuse me for using a bit of sarcasm as a launching pad. The “lost” are outsiders—outside our circles, and our lives; outside our sphere of acquaintance and activity; outside our comfort zone. So far out that they don’t cross our paths and so remote to our people-radar that they don’t show up on the screen.

When we think about them (which isn’t often, especially without coaching) we know they’re there. We know we saw one once or more than once, or on more than one occasion. If we should think “hard” about them we assure ourselves that we could actually “find” one if needed (not find in an evangelical sense, but an experimental and phenomenological sense). Yep, it might take some doing. We might have to power up some relational Hubble Telescope to scan the deep space of our social environment, but sooner or later we’d notice a blip on the screen (or is it a blob?). And, we’d high five one of our fellow-insiders over the skill—the dogged perseverance, the enormous effort expended—in locating an outsider. He was “lost” in relational space, but we “found” him.

Surely I jest. Of course! None of us is so calloused as this suggests. We know they **are lost!** That is as serious as it gets—serious as sin (and salvation).

Even so, unless something connects us to the lost, something like blood, the “lost” easily get lost to our consciousness. They are out of sight and out of mind. They become invisible and their absence inconsequential. Practically speaking, the “lost” so fade into the background that we must strain to see them. And because straining is hard to do on a sustained basis, we lose sight of them. The lost become doubly lost to our awareness.

God, however, views them otherwise. To begin, God does indeed **view** them, constantly and intensely. To use the radar image again, they register on God’s monitor and God tracks their movement. They are not really “lost” at all in the sense of out of sight or unaccounted for or beyond reach. Still, they are dislocated, moving errantly and recklessly, veering off on ominous trajectories, at one and the same time headed both somewhere and nowhere. But they are always seen, keenly observed, unfalteringly followed.

God views them as missing. The whole point of calling them “lost” in the first place was to describe the hole in the heart, the empty place at the table, the unclaimed presents under the tree, the diminished joy, the

incompleteness that settles over a household when some who belong don't show up. "Lost" denotes the pain of the family as much as the position of the missing.

That "lost" can be used in this way justifies adding the adjective "cherished" to the noun "missing." The Father of the prodigal **cherished** the missing son. Other scenes that are way too common capture it as well: the family that opens the door to a uniformed messenger who reports, "missing in action;" and the distraught survivor of earth quake who bloodies her hands clawing through the rubble for her baby, straining to hear the slightest whimper. These painful scenes also reflect the Father's heart longing for cherished daughters and sons who are missing from the Household. They reflect the heroics of the Son's self-sacrificing mission to our world to embrace and welcome his own beloved brothers and sisters home. And they reflect the Spirit's relentless and tireless search and rescue efforts all around us 24/7.

It is deeply humbling to realize that **we** once pained the Father's heart in such ways and provoked the same loving gestures. Likewise, it is deeply convicting to acknowledge how little we sometimes are like our Father. What can we do about our failure to feel our Father's pain over the cherished missing?

I said above, unless something connects us to the "lost," something like *blood*, the "lost" easily get lost to our consciousness. Unless something connects us, something like blood! It is a means of grace for me to recall (and invite the Holy Spirit to stir up my memory, to rekindle the reality again and again) that, indeed, I **am** among the cherished and formerly missing, that not even the brokenness of God's heart could fix it, and only the giving of God's Son, that nothing less than bloodshed, could "fix" it—that is, find me and fetch me Home. The depth of cherishing was the death of God's Son. What bound the brokenness of God's heart and mine was blood. Unless something connects us, the lost remain lost. But precisely that **does** connect us. We/I and all God's cherished missing are Family. Their loss is family loss. Their absence hurts us all. Their embrace makes our day, soon to be HIS never ending day.

Will I/we let God the Spirit knit our hearts to God's and script our lives to the story of prodigals streaming home? And, then, will we play our part in the story?

We can relax a bit. It's not like we have the lead. Most of us have more modest roles to play. But it delights our Father and it somehow carries the story forward when we play our role? What *is* our role? Consider another scenario.

Some time ago I began to think about (I believe it was the Lord directing me here) the Amber Alert System, that incredible national network of notification. When the authorities issue an alert, we know that a child is gone, parents are distraught, and the authorities are appealing to every one of us to mobilize, join together, and do whatever it takes to find the little one who is missing. The alert enjoins the public to assist the ongoing efforts to find the missing one.

I've begun to understand that God views lost people as cherished sons and daughters who are missing. God issues an "Amber Alert" on every one of them. His alert calls us to joining together, mobilize in concern, keep eyes and ears open, marshal our resources—and whatever else—until the cherished missing are Home. Part of our role in welcoming the missing home, then, is simply to stay alert, keep watch, reach out, reach toward, and to do these things in partnership with others. Somehow, in the story of God's way with people, being on alert helps.

Then, also, imagine how the story of the prodigal might have ended. The foolish younger son leaves home, squanders what he has, suffers unexpected loss, becomes desperate, and responds by doing desperate things, until he doesn't know what else to do. Back home, we know his Father waits and hopes for his return. And we also know what happens when the missing boy comes close enough to be seen by the anguished Father. It's a great story, except for the sour ending when the older son behaves so badly.

But what if the older son had been moved by his Father's anguish? Suppose the Father's pain became his and he began to feel the sense of loss, the brokenness of the household, the diminished dreams such a loss invited. Suppose, then, the elder son decided to do something. He didn't know what exactly, but something. One day before dawn he leaves. He's heard enough from the rumor mill to know the general direction his brother had taken. So, he—the older brother—sets out. Then, suppose, by sheer "luck" he keeps running into people who've seen his missing brother and, eventually, he finds him. Suppose, it's just about the time famine strikes, food is scarce, and his brother is starting to hurt and is getting scared. Suppose the older brother is *there* simply to remind him of what he left, to assure him that it's still there, abundantly there, and that his Father isn't mad. Suppose, for the first time, the younger boy who went missing senses that even his older brother isn't mad or jealous, and hasn't come to ridicule or condemn. No, he's come for the sake of his Father. He's come to assist his brother—in any way possible—in coming home. Suppose on their way back, the older brother insists they stop at the market for the makings of a party.

We often marvel over the fact that the missing boy didn't have to come all the way home. Before he arrived his Father saw him, ran to him, and brought him the rest of the way. Wouldn't it be another marvel—if all God's cherished missing had brothers or sisters come to them even before they started home, out of sheer love for the Father and them?