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Pentecost 19C
Peace, Seattle
September 11, 2016
Luke 15:1-10

LOST AND FOUND

This morning, a contemporary parable about being lost and being found.[1]

His name was Garth Shoeski, and he was the most unpopular child in my 3rd grade class at Lincoln McKinley Elementary School. It wasn't hard to figure out why. Garth was different.

Garth was like that character in the Peanuts Comic Strip, Pigpen:
- He was always surrounded by a cloud of dirt and debris,
- his front teeth were chipped and brown with decay,
- his shoes were chronically untied,
- and he smelled like a bag of dirty laundry.

Back in 1st Grade, during the first week of school, Garth had gotten into trouble for chewing on his new pencils. After scolding him for the third time that morning, Mrs. Morris told Garth to sit quietly with his head down on his desk.

When he raised his hand to go to the bathroom, Mrs. Morris ignored him. Two minutes later a pool began to form under his chair. He had had an accident right there in the classroom.
His reputation was sealed.

From then on, it was hard to be neutral about Garth. Either you made fun of him, you were repelled by him, or you felt sorry for him.

By third grade Garth had become the kid with no real friends. He was used to being taunted and teased, and so he spent most of his time alone.

At the end of September each year, the two third-grade classes at Lincoln McKinley always went on a field trip to the Beaver Creek State Park, about twenty miles south of town, in the forested foothills of the Bear Paw Mountains.

Mr. Hardy and Mrs. Billson organized the trip each year and over the years the fall field trip had become legendary through the stories of the older kids.
Now it was our turn, and we were totally psyched!

When our two buses arrived at the park, our teachers handed us our buddy team assignments and the list for this year's scavenger hunt.

We were supposed to work with partners in teams of four. Then, at lunchtime, each group would display their findings, and Mr. Hardy and Mrs. Billson would judge which foursome deserved to be the "Nature Scavenger Champions."

When my best friend Raymond and I found out we were paired together, we were elated! It couldn't be better! But our friend David was not so happy. He'd been paired with—you guessed it—Garth Shoeski. Garth was part of our Team, Team #12, and there was nothing we could do about it.

[1] This "parable" is based on experiences I had as an elementary student at Lincoln McKinley Elementary School in Havre, Montana. Names have been changed. Like the parables Jesus told, much of this story is not historically factual; nonetheless, I hope it rings true.

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We got off the bus and gathered in teams. And while we read through the scavenger list Raymond and David and I exchanged glances: we made an unspoken pact that the three of us would stick together while Garth would work alone.

We gave him a few of the easier items off the list to find…
- an acorn, a colored maple leaf, a pine cone,

…and then the three of us went off searching for the real cool stuff ourselves:
- a deer antler, a porcupine quill, fur from a wild animal, a rainbow trout.

We left Garth behind.

When we regrouped at lunchtime, Garth was already sitting there at the picnic table. His pants, from the knees down, were soaking wet, but the only thing in his collection bag was the acorn.

We, on the other hand, had had greater success, and we figured we stood as good a chance as any of the other teams at winning.

In the history of these field trips, no team had ever been able to acquire each and every item. There was always one impossible item on the list. This year it was the trout. How could you catch a fish without a hook and bait?

One by one the teams opened their bags—and several of them had more of a flare than we did for showing off their stuff. In the end one of the girl teams won.

But our disappointment was short lived because the rest of the afternoon was free time. So the three of us took off again to look for the cave we'd heard about from others.

Later, when the teacher's blew their whistles for us to return to the buses, it came much too soon. But we still had one more treat to look forward to: the stop at the Dairy Queen on the way back to school.

We piled onto the buses and the teachers began taking role by team. When we heard our Team's number called, the three of us answered in unison **HERE**! Until that moment we hadn't thought of where Garth might be.

He wasn't on our bus, so we figured he must have gotten on the other one. We could double check when we stopped for ice cream.

Half an hour later as we got off the buses at Dairy Queen, we watched the other bus unload. No Garth. We started getting worried.

We found Mrs. Billson and told her how we had thought Garth was on the other bus. We saw a flicker of panic flash across her face as she turned and quickly found Mr. Hardy. Had he seen Garth? No. **So it was true. Garth had not been on either bus. Garth Shoeski had been left behind.** A sense of dread and shame began spreading over us. It was our fault.

Garth was supposed to be part of our team, but we hadn't let him. We'd pushed him away, just like he'd been pushed away so many times before. And now he was alone back there in the State Park somewhere.

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Maybe he hadn't heard the whistle. Maybe something had happened to him. Maybe he was lost.

What were we going to do? There was only one thing <u>TO</u> do.
Our teachers blew their whistles again and had us get back on the buses. They explained what had happened, and asked when Garth was last seen.

The last time anyone could remember seeing him was at lunchtime, over two hours ago. It was decided that both buses would return to the park together.

When we arrived, fifty pairs of eyes scanned the gravel parking lot and surrounding woods, but Garth was nowhere in sight.

Mr. Hardy and Mr. Pearson, our bus driver, would go looking for him while the rest of us stayed put. The buses were stone silent; each one of us was deep in thought.

A full 20 minutes passed and then we saw them. Mr. Hardy and Mr. Pearson were walking toward us across the meadow, and between them, his hands in each theirs, was Garth. They'd found him.

Great relief flooded over all of us on the bus, and we all started talking at once. But when Garth reached our bus, everyone shushed, all eyes were on him.

Garth climbed the stairs and stood there at the head of the aisle, right in front of us, his head down.

Raymond and David and I eyed each other.
WE'RE REAL SORRY GARTH, we said. WE DIDN'T MEAN TO LEAVE YOU BEHIND—HONEST.

Slowly Garth lifted his eyes to meet ours, then we watched as a smile began spreading across his dirt-streaked face.
He reached behind him and took, from Mr. Pearson, a short stick with a string tied on it. Then, turning back toward us, he lifted the stick.

At the end of the string was the sleek, silver body of a rainbow trout.

The bus erupted! It was complete pandemonium! Shouts of disbelief, squeals of surprise and delight, and chants of SHOE-SKI, SHOE-SKI, SHOE-SKI!

Garth just stood there with the biggest chipped-tooth grin you'd ever seen, <u>soaking it in</u>; holding that fish aloft.

The lost one had been returned safe and sound. And never again would we be able to look at Garth without remembering that close call, and this single, shining moment.
Jesus tells these parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son in response to critics who accuse him of keeping the wrong kind of company.

Jesus, the gospels tell us, is constantly criticized for hanging around with the wrong crowd; with tax collectors and sinners of every description, the down and outers, the outcaste, the foreigner, the Garth Shoeski's of the world.

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And Jesus tells these stories because he wants us to know that God's way of seeing human worth is different than our way of seeing human worth—and different than the world's way.

- In God's eyes, no one is expendable.
- In God's eyes, every individual counts.
- In God's eyes, every single human being carries within God's sacred image, and is an infinitely precious child, no matter what anyone else might think.

As he tells these stories, Jesus is traveling on his way to Jerusalem and ultimately to his own death.

His willing journey is the surest testimony we have that God will go to any length, even to the point of giving his own life, in order that you and I and all people might receive life and life abundant.

In the end we all need finding, every one of us. And we need not fear.

For the God who became one of us in Jesus, the God who poured himself out for us on the cross, is a God whose searching will not cease, until every last one of us is brought back and restored, safe and sound.

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Let us pray…
Searching, saving God, you seek out each one of us, and call us into your community of joy.
Help us to receive your embrace with gratitude, and to treat each person we meet, no matter how they look, no matter what their religion or ethnicity, their orientation or country of origin, as you treat us.
In Jesus' name. Amen.