

“Love Will Seek You”

Song of Songs 3:1-4a

Luke 15:8-10

1 John 4:16b-21

A lost coin, a lost love, a lost brother or sister: nobody likes to lose things, but it's something that we're all kinda good at. Sure, some of us are better at losing things than others, but given enough time and distraction, we'll lose just about anything – no matter how important it is. And we look forward to that glorious day when our, “light shall break forth like the dawn” and that lost bauble will return to its rightful place by our side. And there will be much rejoicing. There is nothing like the joy when something that was lost returns home again.

Inspired by Erik's moving anthem choice, we will be looking at the life and work of William Still. William Still was born in 1821 in New Jersey, born free, though his parents had both suffered as slaves. He was the youngest of 18 children. He didn't have much in the way of formal education, but he taught himself to read and write. In 1847 when he was 26 years old, he started working for the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery. Founded in 1775, it was the oldest abolitionist society in the country and Benjamin Franklin once served as its president. William Still became the chairman of the “Vigilance Committee,” which provided direct aid to slaves who had escaped and reached Philadelphia. He raised money to help runaways and make their journeys easier. He even helped Harriet Tubman financially. In fact, William Still is sometimes called the “Father of the Underground Railroad.” He helped as many as 800 slaves escape and he opened his home as a hiding place for them. Not only that – he got to know every slave that he met and he recorded their stories. He knew that their lives and their struggles mattered and he was determined not to let their lives be lost to history. In 1872, Still

published a book of their stories – one of the few early histories that portrayed slaves as having courage and daring and fortitude.

But before all this – before he was the chairman of the Vigilance Committee and a bold rescuer of others, he was a simple clerk. And in 1850, when he was 29 years old, he met a man named Peter. Peter was an escaped slave, telling William his story. Peter said that his father had bought his way out of slavery in Maryland, but his mother had not been able to do so. Many years before, Charity had tried to escape from slavery in Maryland, but she was caught along with her four children. For her next attempt, she took only her 2 daughters with her and managed to reach her husband Levin in New Jersey. Tragically left behind, Peter explained that he and his brother Levin, Jr. were eventually sold to slave masters in Kentucky and then resold to a man in Alabama. Levin, Jr. was caught visiting his wife without permission from his slave owner. He was whipped so severely that he died.

At the age of 50, Peter managed to escape and he came to the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery to find his mother and father or any other members of his family. William listened to Peter's story with shock and amazement. After learning how Levin, Jr. had died, William proclaimed, "What if I told you I was your brother!" Peter's story was one that William knew very well because it was his parent's story, too. Their parents had struggled for years to find and free their two oldest sons, but they were lost – seemingly forever. After Peter met William, he was reunited with his mother after a separation of 42 years and he met all of the rest of his 16 brothers and sisters that he didn't even know that he had.

I can not even imagine the miracle of that moment – the unbelievable joy, the shock, the disbelief, the overflowing hearts. And neither of them knew – neither of them even suspected

that they might have been who the other was looking for, a restoration of family where it must have seemed impossible.

When we lose things or even people, we can find ourselves lost in despair or we can find ourselves becoming seekers. In our passage from the Song of Songs, we hear the voice of the bride to be. Some believe her speech is the retelling of a dream – others that of a sleepless night. Either way, she wants the one whom her soul loves. Finding him again is her sole focus and she will not rest until they are together again. She looks for him, she calls for him, she even bothers the night guards in the city who, I'm guessing, probably don't really care about this lovesick young woman. But she is devoted and she is clear in her intention – she will be reunited and when she found him, she, “held him, and would not let him go.” Her satisfaction comes from her love.

Or let's look at the woman from the Gospel lesson this morning. Certainly she doesn't love her money as much as the bride to be loves her fiancée (at least I hope she doesn't!). But she will search her house, sweeping the floor, lighting an oil lamp to look in all the dark corners, behind and underneath everything until that which is lost is found once more. And her joy is so great that she has to share it with everyone she knows – she publishes the news abroad. Tell everyone – party at my house. I have found what was lost!

Losing, seeking, finding, and celebrating – we can understand what this means. The heartache, the yearning, the cautious hope, and the wild jubilation. What is interesting about the lost coin story is that Jesus tells us that's exactly what the joy is like in heaven when one sinner repents – a change of heart and a change of life. We are the coin. We are the lost love. We are the lost brother, the lost parents, that lost family. We don't cause ourselves to be found. We don't twinkle extra hard in the corner of the room or transmit GPS coordinates to the loved ones that

seek us out. G-d is the seeker and we are the found. And that means that we are not defined by our lost-ness. Being lost is never the sum total of who we are. We are G-d's children and we are all sisters and brothers. Just imagine telling someone how lost you feel to sin, how alone, how unreachable, only to have them say as William Still did, "What if I told you I was your brother!" "What if I told you I was your sister!" What if isolation is a myth and the idea of being unforgivable, irredeemable, hopeless – what if that was a lie that we don't have to believe anymore?

Because when we look at 1 John, we find bold words of hope. It is simple enough to say that "G-d is love" and to ascribe great and holy and wonderful things to an untouchable, unreachable G-d. It is another thing entirely to say, "those who abide in love abide in G-d, and G-d abides in them." We may think we are lost to sin, but we are living in love, which means that we live in G-d and G-d lives in us. How can we be lost when G-d is our home? How can you be lost when you know that love will seek you?

And so, let us find sisters and brothers in unexpected places. Let us unmask sin for all of its weakness, grasping hard to the power and love of G-d. And let us never forget that our repentance on earth means a radiant, boisterous, gleeful, outrageous party in heaven and it is part of our calling to fill our Lord and Savior with gladness. May you celebrate your home in the Lord and in this family of faith every day of your life. Amen.