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Ellen Fowler Skidmore
Forest Lake Presbyterian

Finding and Being Found

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

In the last year, I have been privileged to have conversations with some adults in our community who either were never raised in a church and so have never thought much about God, or who, although raised with some church exposure, are really not sure what they think about God (much less church). Some of those I have talked with have rejected the Church (and sometimes God with the Church) because of the terrible fighting or the blatant abuse and hypocrisy of those who called themselves Christians. Others have simply never had either the interest or the chance to think much about God. Several months ago, I asked one of those folks, "Do you believe that there is any eternal and infinite force or being? Is there any reality larger than us? And if so, do you believe that we are related in any way to that infinite reality?" And he replied, "Yes, I think that there is some force or being that is eternal, but I guess I just haven't thought about it much. I don't know what I believe."

I don't think the folks I have talked to are alone. I think that there are a lot of people who are wondering about God, and who wonder where God is. If God is real, why don't we feel, hear or experience God more? This is especially so for those in crisis. Where is God when I am suffering, grieving or afraid? God doesn't feel especially real, even for those who have been taught the language about God. And often, either the Church itself or individual Christians themselves have made God out to be so angry, vengeful, or judgmental that those who are unsure ask themselves, "Who would want to worship such a god?" And sometimes, having no real experience of God's presence, people will fill their lives with so much that there is not time to think about God and no need for God. Sunday mornings are needed for sleeping or being with family or recreation, because our weeks are so full of everything else. And this works pretty well right up until something goes wrong, or we face death, or until we achieve our goals and check off our bucket list and realize that we are still unfulfilled and searching for purpose.

So, if you or someone you love has ever asked themselves, "Where is God?" or "If God is real, then why don't I see more evidence, feel God, hear God, get answers to my prayers?" Or if we have ever said, "I believe that there is a God, but I don't really think that God has much to do with me, and I prefer it that way." Then, today's Scripture passages offer us some guidance and some food for thought, because both passages talk about finding and being found by God.

The most important thing that both Luke and 1 Timothy tell us is that when it comes to knowing God, it is GOD THAT DOES THE FINDING. God does the seeking. God does the saving. To be saved, to be found, means that God comes to us and finds us. The Pharisee Saul was very busy and felt that he knew and loved God and was diligent in serving the God he was sure he knew by jailing and killing those who knew and loved Jesus. Saul did not think he was lost. But in the middle of a road trip to persecute Christians, God found Saul, struck him blind and stopped him long enough for Saul to be completely changed by the encounter with God. So Pharisee Saul becomes the Apostle Paul, and he then understands the truth of God's love and grace. Jesus says that the lost lamb is found because the shepherd loves the lamb so much that he will leave the other 99 to go search. Frankly, that is not the way the world works. No business minded shepherd would leave 99 sheep to go in search of one lost lamb. Lost lambs are just a part of doing business. Human economies protect their profit margin and are willing to accept the premise that some lambs are expendable. Jesus says, that is not the way the economy of God works. Every single lamb is valuable. Every single lamb is sought out. The coin is lost due to human error or carelessness, but God – in the form of the woman – leaves no corner unsearched and no hiding place unexamined in her relentless search. So – says Jesus – does God seek for us. The Apostle Paul, the lost lamb and the coin are all found only because of God's initiative. The good news of the Gospel is that you are valuable, loved and God seeks you out. Anyone who tells you otherwise has not met God.

But, the question that this raises is "If this is really true, then why do we not see, hear and feel God more often?" If Scripture tells us that God seeks us out, then why is God not more visible? This is troublesome. I do often wish that I would get a certified letter, or that a voice would speak to me aloud. Why does the presence of God in the world seem so hidden if God is so busy seeking us?

The answer from Scripture that makes the most sense in my own life is that God is a God of Love and Love is only possible where there is relationship. In other words, God does not make us listen, and does not force us to love or to seek God in return. Precisely because God is love, God preserves our free will and our ability to choose. If we were forced or had no choice but to love God, it would no longer be a loving relationship, but instead would be abusive and coercive.

God does the searching. God does the finding. But that does not mean that we are completely passive in the process of being found. When God finds us, we have choices about what we do with that reality. My experience is that even when God does find us, we may or may not see, hear, recognize or know God. And there are lots of reasons that we may not see, hear, recognize or know God when God shows up. I'll mention three.

First, Paul says that he did not hear, see or recognize God in the person of Jesus because he "acted in ignorance and without faith." In other words, he did not know what he did not know. He thought that he knew God. In fact, he was so certain that he knew God, that he couldn't see God when God showed up in a form he wasn't expecting. Good, well-meaning and faithful people are particularly susceptible to this condition. It is the Pharisees and legal experts in

Luke's gospel who cannot see God in their midst because they are ignorant of their own ignorance. Ignorance of our ignorance is not confined to Christians, but it has and continues to cause the Christian Church to fail in our service of God over and over again. When we – as the Pharisees and Legal Experts – believe that we are in control and we are sure of ourselves, we really don't need saving. So, we can't recognize a savior when we think we can save ourselves. We don't need a savior until we know what we don't know. The best example I can think of is the move from active addiction to the beginning of recovery. An addict (alcohol, drugs, food, work, etc.) believes that his/her problems are caused by everyone else, but never by their drug of choice. THEY are fine. The problem is with everyone else. That is ignorance of our own ignorance. Once they learn that it is in fact their own addiction and powerlessness over that addiction that is causing them pain, then and only then is recovery possible. The first 3 steps of the 12 step programs are,

- We admitted that we were powerless over [alcohol] and that our lives have become unmanageable.
- We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to God as we understand him.

With regards to knowing and loving God, all of us are addicted to control, and to the illusion that what we know is all there is to know. We are all ignorant of our own ignorance. And until there is a humility to seek what we do not know, we cannot be saved, and we cannot know God. That is the first reason that we so often do not hear, see or recognize God.

The second reason that we often do not hear, see or recognize God is that we have filled every need until we have no need left. And if and when we feel we may have a need we fill it with something else. So, when our new house ceases to please and we feel unfulfilled, we sell that house and buy another. When we work hard to achieve our work goals and get the position, power and salary we wanted, but we still feel unfulfilled, then we think it must be because our marriage is no longer good. So, we have an affair or get a divorce to fill the need. When we are sad or disappointed in life, we decide that a cruise, spa day or other treat will fix that need, and so we fill that need for love and relationship with the trip of a lifetime, a spa day or a box of chocolates. You get the drift, and I'm assuming we can all recognize ourselves here. When there is so much noise in our lives, busyness in our schedule and when we forget to seek God above all else and seek instead comfort, security, affirmation or leisure, then we turn away from God and lose our ability to see God in the actual blessings and beauty of life. The mark of sinners who may be saved is that they know that they have a need. Do we?

The third reason that we often do not hear, see or recognize God is that we have stopped listening, looking or learning what God is like. It is very easy to live life an inch deep and a mile wide and to be busy with things that finally do not matter. The American way of life is to be busy and self-occupied. We rarely to stop to consider whether or not there is really anything that is ultimate and eternal and if so, how we are related to that which is eternal and ultimate. God created us with a longing to be in relationship with God's own self, but it happens all the

time that we content ourselves with something less than God and just stop looking for God. Inattention and passivity are often a reason that we no longer hear, see or recognize God.

Now remember, we began with the affirmation that God does all of the finding. Which might lead us to think that we can simply wait, like that lost coin, to be found and that passivity and inattention are ok. Two things are true. First, God does all of the finding. And second, it is possible not to notice when God finds us because we are passive and inattentive and have stopped looking for God to show up.

I have a vivid memory of being lost when I was four or five years old. My family lived in Atlanta and I was with my mother at a shopping center that I think was Lenox Square. There was an outside art exhibit and my mother walked through the art exhibit with me in tow. Somewhere along the line, I stopped paying attention to where my mother was and began to look at the pictures. And I remember my panic when I realized that I was following the wrong set of legs. I remember realizing that I was lost. I believe that I wandered around a bit, looking for my mother, and finally backed up to a large planter, unsure of what to do. I can promise you that although I was not still walking around actively seeking my mother, I was exquisitely tuned to her appearance. When she appeared, she did not have to knock me over the head. As I remember it, I saw her looking for me before she saw me cowering at the base of the planter. I was waiting to be found, and I was actively looking to be found. That might be the most concrete way I can express what the life of faith is actually like.

You are known. You are loved. God is searching for you. That is Gospel.

Do we know we are lost?

Have we decided that we are lost from God or are we so busy with other things we haven't noticed that the most important relationship in our lives is missing? Are we following the wrong legs?

Are we actively and attentively looking for God to show up and find us?

When we can say "YES!" to those last three questions, Scripture says that that is when the party begins! 1 Timothy says it this way: "Now to the king of the ages, to the immortal, invisible, and only God, may honor and glory be given to him forever and always! Amen." (1 Tim 1:17) That is just biblical language for – Let the Party Begin!