

4th Sabbath in Lent
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SEARCH ENGINE

Luke 15:1-10

Series: *faith.net*

This is the third and final sermon in the series *faith.net* in which I've been using common cybernetic terms as metaphors for Christian Faith and life. Previous sermons were titled "Security Protection Program" and "Defragging." Today's sermon is "Search Engine," a modern term associated with the World Wide Web.

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As most of you know, a "search engine" is a program on your computer that enables you to search for information on the Internet. It's a very useful, powerful tool, whether you are making airline reservations, need a recipe for cornbread, working the crossword puzzle, looking for a job, a company or a church, doing research on the family tree or a sermon, buying or selling a car, or a billion other subjects.

There are a number of search engines available, some more suited for specific purposes than others. "Google" is by far the most popular and largest. In fact, it is more than a noun or name of a company; it has become a verb in our language to describe searching the World Wide Web. We say, "I googled that (information) on the Net." Languages

and, of necessity, dictionaries change constantly. I know, because I googled the word “google” on the Internet and the online Miriam-Webster Dictionary said so!

God is the Search Engine in the Bible. From the Book of Genesis through Revelation, God is searching for humanity, seeking to develop a relationship with us, to love and care for us, to guide and confront us. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve—disobedient, vulnerable, and afraid—hide themselves. God comes looking for them, calling out, “Where are you?” and finds them. The psalmist prays, “Search me, O God, and know my heart.”(139:23) St. Paul writes that “the Spirit searches everything.”(1 Cor. 2:10). Jesus said that he “came to seek out and to save the lost.”(Luke 19:10). These and other biblical references indicate that God is seeker who invites us into relationship and to become seekers for others who need to be found.

And that’s the subject of our scripture for today that, according to Luke’s gospel, is prompted by some grumbling among the church folk about the fact that Jesus is welcoming sinners and eating with them. They said that he even enjoyed table fellowship with tax collectors—who were hated because they collected taxes for the Roman oppressors and skimmed a healthy percentage right off the top. What kind of rabbi associates with such people? They are not our kind of people!

In response to that religious discontent, Jesus tells three parables: one about a lost sheep, another about a lost coin, and the third—not included in our text for today—about two lost sons, misnamed by tradition, incidentally, as the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.” In this brilliant trilogy, the primary stress is not on what is lost but on the one who seeks, namely the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine and searches for the one lost sheep, the woman who sweeps the house until she finds the lost coin, the parent who welcomes the prodigal home and goes in search of the elder son. These are the primary characters, the search engines, who drop everything to look for the lost.

These characters portray a God who does not give up on the least, the losers and outsiders of the world. We see here, a God who loves those in the flock, the community of the found, but God also loves those who have strayed and lost their way. God is a persistent searcher.

True to Luke’s inclusive nature, this Seeker God is portrayed as a shepherd (low on the socio-economic ladder), a woman (in a society where men openly thanked God they were not women), and as a well-to-do farmer/rancher. These pretty much cover the spectrum.

We have all lost something or someone of value. And we have all lost our way in life. So, we have no difficulty finding ourselves in these

parables. And when the lost animal, coin or child is found, it is the Seeker/Finder who invites friends and neighbors, throws a party, and says, “Come, rejoice and celebrate with me for I have found what had been lost!” The occasion becomes a community event as all are invited to join in the festivities to celebrate a relationship restored and renewed.

In case there is any doubt about the meaning of these parables, Jesus concludes by saying, first: “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Again, following the second parable: “Just so, I tell you there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Rejoicing isn’t limited to the neighborhood community; it includes all of heaven when the Search Engine God is successful in finding and restoring relationship.

These parables are also about repentance. Repentance, as I explained in last week’s sermon on “Defragging,” is changing life direction, literally turning around, and following the path toward God. One person told me that because of my sermon she and her spouse had defragged. Initially, I thought she was referring to a spiritual experience of repentance, until she said that they had each defragged their computers! Oh, well! Repentance in these parables also means being found and brought back into relationship with God and the community

of faith, the church. Repentance is the occasion for celebration and rejoicing in the community of faith and in heaven.

Let me say to you now: If you have lost your way, God is looking for you. If you need a new start in life, God will welcome you and put you on the right path. If you don't have a community that will rejoice in your presence on the journey of faith toward God, you are invited to join with us. And we will rejoice with God and heaven!

Now, remember the self-righteous, religious grumblers for whom Jesus told these stories? I know we are all saying in our minds, "Yea, for Jesus! Those snobs are getting just what they deserve. That's telling them, Jesus. I'm right there with you, man!"

Careful now, be careful about premature celebration! When was the last time you went looking for the least and the lost? When did you feed a homeless family or spend the night with them in the church when we hosted Interfaith Hospitality Network. When was the last time you donated to United Methodist Committee on Relief for Haiti and Chile? When did you invite someone to your Bible Study Group, your School Class or to attend church with you? When did you introduce yourself to a visitor and welcome them, show them around the church? When did you offer someone a ride to church or to the doctor's office? When did

you last speak about your personal faith in Christ to one who was struggling for hope? Where are you in these parables?

The doggone irony is that in these parables sometimes the religious folks, the insiders, like many of us, also need repentance because we've been neglecting God's seeking business of looking for, inviting and welcoming people into the church personally and institutionally. Repentance is a process and being found is a constant experience where Christians are concerned. I don't know about you, but I get lost—a lot! And God is still looking for and finding me! Christians need to repent.

Want an example of church folk needing to repent? Outside doors for our buildings, including our sanctuary, operable by push button so persons in wheelchairs or with disabilities can enter without assistance. It's about the need for institutional repentance and for radical hospitality to all people and accessibility to everything that happens in our church so folks can be found and grow in faith with us.

Here's another. Last week clergy and laity attended an event with Bishop Crutchfield. We looked at some startling statistics about the United Methodist Church in Arkansas. Overall the church is experiencing decline in membership, largely because we've neglected God's seeking business by not growing new congregations and not

renewing older congregations, by not inviting people to church. Denominationally, we are forgetting how to follow a seeking God and how to lead people to Jesus. Repentance, a new direction, is indicated.

Thankfully, our congregation is growing. We've made some progress, but we can't become complacent. We need to begin another worship service because New Heights is overflowing. Parking remains a problem. In the next administration, PHUMC should consider giving birth to another congregation in Central Arkansas. Why? Because our seeker God invites us to be in the seeking business! A great way to celebrate the church centennial!

Like most children, I enjoyed the game of Hide and Seek with others in my neighborhood. Whoever was "it" covered their eyes and counted to 50 while the rest scattered in all directions to hide. When each one was found there was a race between the finder and the one found to tag home base. One time I hid so well that nobody could find me. At first, I thought that I had won the game. But then, after a while the others simply gave up and went home, leaving me in my hiding place. As I crawled out of hiding, I realized how very important it is to be found and how much I really did want to be found. The worst thing of all is not to be found!

Remember: Our Seeker God never gives up. God is seeking you and seeking me because God knows that without God's abounding grace in our lives we are lost, indeed. And when you and I are found, there is always new life and great joy! Thanks be to God! Amen.

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