

A pastor phoned the home of some recent visitors to the church. A child's whispered voice was on the other end of the line.

"Who is this?" asked the pastor.

"Jimmy."

"How old are you, Jimmy?"

"Four."

The pastor asked, "Jimmy, can I speak with your mom?"

After a pause: "She's busy."

"Then could I please speak to your dad?"

"He's busy."

"Are there any other adults in your home?"

A longer pause. "The police."

"Then let me speak to one of the police officers."

"They're busy."

"Jimmy, who else is there?"

"Firefighters."

"Well, could you please put one of the firefighters on the phone?"

"No, they're busy too."

"Jimmy, what are all those busy people doing?"

"Looking for me!"¹

Jimmy wasn't lost, but everyone else thought he was. And when you've lost someone you love, you

invite everyone to help you look—the police, the firefighters, neighbors, family. Maybe even God.

Jesus told several stories about things and people who were lost—a lost sheep, lost coin, even a lost son. The stories ended, though, with the lost being found, as in the song *Amazing Grace*—"I once was lost but now am found."

When Jesus began his ministry by speaking in his hometown synagogue, he was very aware of the lost people he hoped to find as he read the from the prophet Isaiah. The scripture celebrated good news for the poor, freedom to prisoners, sight to the blind, and freedom for everyone who suffers. As Jesus read the scripture, many spoke well about him until he suggested the words were coming true, right then and there.

As the crowd may have wondered what Jesus meant, he referred to a story from their scriptures about the time the prophet Elijah helped a widow from the town of Zarephath, an outsider during a famine, rather than going to his own people. The crowd listening to Jesus may have begun to wonder

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what Jesus was implying, but then he told them another story about the time when many people had skin diseases and the prophet Elisha healed an outsider, not his own people.

The light bulb suddenly went off in their heads—this hometown Jesus was comparing them to these stories, suggesting that he had come to bring hope to others, that God was looking for the lost ones, not them! In response, the hometown crowd tried to throw him over a cliff, but he managed to slip away.

It seems backwards, doesn't it? They worshiped God. They knew God. They weren't lost, and yet, they couldn't accept that God looked for the lost. Jesus suggested that God was looking for someone else—those people who are often overlooked. It would be like if Jesus entered our sanctuary and read the same passage from the prophet Isaiah and suggested that he was here not to find us, but to find those living in the streets, those who don't have homes, those who eat at the soup kitchen, those in prison. Even though we cherish that God

loves us, sometimes we forget that God also loves those not sitting in our churches.

In 1994, a famous serial killer was baptized in a metal whirlpool in prison in Wisconsin by a small-town pastor named Roy Ratcliff. Ratcliff's congregants recoiled at the idea that their pastor baptized a convicted serial killer. Some congregants would say to Ratcliff that if heaven welcomes serial killers, they want no part in it. Ratcliff's congregants express something that perhaps even we struggle with sometimes. In our fallen world, some people have committed crimes so great, it's difficult to imagine that God could forgive them... Yet Pastor Ratcliff says this, "Can an evil person turn to God? I have to believe that. What part of...Christ can't save him but can save you?"²

Some may feel uncomfortable with the idea that God's grace could extend to those who have done something so terrible, but where does one draw the line? Have you ever done something really "bad" and felt sorry? Would God exclude you from grace? I'm sure God would welcome you and me, along with others who have made terrible mistakes in life.

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Last month, a man in Mishawaka seemed lost, and yet, somehow, he found his way as he walked up to a police officer this past Christmas season and handed him \$1500 in \$100 bills. Since he left his contact information, a police officer followed up later to say thank you. Listen to his story:

When I arrived at the house...I noticed immediately that this was NOT a person of great wealth. The house was small, the windows had plastic taped over them, the screen door was broken, the roof looked damaged...The man came out...I handed him my card and told him that I was there to thank him for his generosity...

Apparently, we have been to his house on numerous occasions for domestics involving highly intoxicated people. He stated that it never got physical, and although he never went to jail, he probably should have for his behavior toward officers. He said he is one year sober now, and in a relationship with a woman who doesn't drink either.

He recently quit his job because of some corruption he had witnessed, and when he tried

to address it, things began to get worse. He said before he quit, he prayed about his decision and although it was right before the holidays, without any guarantee for future income, he said, "God told him to do what he thought was right." He quit the next day.

He then said within 24 hours he was contacted by a retirement home for an assisted living facility looking for a maintenance supervisor...The job came with a signing bonus. The man felt blessed, and that God had taken care of him, and felt compelled to give his signing bonus as a means of paying it forward. He said the first thing he thought of was the men and women serving as police officers...He wanted to thank us, and show his support.³

Have you ever encountered someone who seems lost? God is there. Have you ever felt like an outsider? God is there. Have you ever felt lost, unsure what to do, filled with sorrow for your mistakes and sins? God is there. Jesus came to seek and save the lost, which even includes you and me.

¹ Homileticonline.com, 1/30/22.

² Joel Gilbert, "Seek and Save the Lost," *Faithlife Sermons*, 2018, <https://sermons.faithlife.com>.

³ From a printed email handed to me.