

Steve Jungkeit  
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
 Texts: Luke 15: 1-10; Matthew 13: 44-46  
 May 2, 2021

“You Took My Joy, I Want It Back”

I don't want you anymore, you took my joy.  
 I don't want you anymore, you took my joy.  
 You took my joy, I want it back.  
 You took my joy -  
 I want it back.

-- Lucinda Williams, “Joy”

The psychoanalyst Karl Jung believed that some objects have a will of their own. He wrote somewhere that one should spend only a limited amount of time searching for a lost object. After a while, he thought, it's better to call off the search, because some objects prefer to stay lost.

That may be. It would help to explain more than a few missing coffee mugs in my life, as well as a few missing books. It would account for some lost socks, and some other articles of clothing that have gone missing over the years. Some things wish to remain lost. When they're gone, that's it. They're gone.

But that's not always the way it works. Some things wish to be found. Sometimes, the things we lose have a way of returning, finding their way back to us. It's that process – of loss, of grief, and sometimes, of return and redress, that I wish to consider with you today.

About ten years ago, our family underwent a minor crisis, the kind that often dogs parents with young children. Our daughter Sabina, who was then 4 years old, lost her blankie, and she was feeling sad and bereft. She had it with her all the time – going to bed, but also at breakfast, while watching TV, and while sitting on the floor next to her as she played. One time, she dropped her blankie in an apartment we had rented in Berlin, in Germany. She dropped it just as we shut the door for the final time and hustled to the airport, where we later realized it was gone. But one day, not long after arriving home, a package arrived from Germany - with Blankie inside! The people we rented the apartment from had found it and sent it back. In time, Blankie came to seem a little like Jesus – lo, with us always, even to the end of the age!

But not this time. This time it was well and truly gone. We had traveled to Cambridge as a family, staying overnight in a plush hotel just off Harvard Square. I had given a lecture, it had gone well, and we returned to Connecticut feeling satisfied. But when it came time to put Sabina to bed...Blankie was gone. We strained to recall the last time we had seen it. Had she left it in the hotel? Maybe? Or maybe she had dropped it on the T, when we were on our way to the children's museum. Or maybe she had left it at the museum itself. We weren't worried, not yet. Blankie always found a way home. So on my next trip to Boston, I retraced our steps. I went to

the hotel and asked if they had found a green children's blanket in the room we had stayed in. They had not. I found the central office of the Boston T, and asked if they had a green blanket in their lost and found. They did not. I called the Children's Museum and asked if by chance they had found it. They had not. I even peered beneath the benches on the T car I was riding in, because, well, you never know. But Blankie wasn't there. This time, it was lost. I reported the news when I got home. Sabina was sad, but I have to admit, I was too. It hurts to lose things that you love, and though it was something relatively minor, it hurt to watch it transpire for my four year old.

Cut to two weeks later. We had moved on. Guests were due to arrive at our house shortly, and we were tidying things up one evening. As Rachael swept up around the living room, she nudged a large chair over in order to get underneath it. "Would you just look at that!" she exclaimed. Wouldn't you know it, lying underneath the chair, there was Blankie. It had been there all along. Sabina and Blankie were reunited, and there was great rejoicing in our house.

Some things are lost, and they prefer to stay that way. But not all the time. Sometimes things wish to be found, even if it takes a long time.

That story of Sabina and her Blankie came to mind last week when I read a similar kind of story, though about a much greater loss. This one was about a musician named Heidi Slyker, a flautist who did the unthinkable: exiting from a cab late one night in Boston, she closed the door, watched the cab drive away, and immediately realized that she had left her instrument in the cab. It wasn't just any flute, and she wasn't just any musician. It was an instrument she had saved money for years to buy when she was in high school, costing more than \$10,000. Slyker was at that moment trying to enter the world of professional music, and the following day she had an audition with the New England Symphony. Imagine seeing the lights of that cab recede, knowing that it had her instrument inside. She contacted the cab company, who couldn't locate the instrument. She went to the media and told her story, but the instrument didn't turn up. Meanwhile, she went through with the audition, but it went poorly. She played on a borrowed instrument and it came off sounding badly. And so she wasn't offered a place in the symphony. Her life took a different direction. But then, eight years after losing the flute, she got a call, saying that her flute had been found. Someone tried to sell it to a music store, and the appraiser had some questions. He did some investigating, and tracked the instrument back to Ms. Slyker. The Boston PD intervened, and then, eight years after the flute had been lost, it found its way back to its rightful owner.<sup>1</sup>

Some things are lost, and they stay that way. But not all the time. Sometimes things wish to be found, even if it takes a long time.

What surprised me about that story was how deeply it moved me. Upon finishing it, I was in tears, and it took me a little time to figure out just why. Here's why. Stories like the lost and found flute, or the lost and found Blankie, function as parables of grief during the pandemic. This is, after all, a time in which most of us are feeling a palpable sense of loss. Each of our losses is different, and some losses are far more acute than others. But somewhere, whether deep down or right on the surface, there are things that we've lost during the past year. Some of us

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<sup>1</sup> See *The New York Times*, "\$10,000 Flute Left in Cab Nine Years Ago..." by Azi Paybarah, April 22, 2021.

have lost things that cannot be reclaimed – people, jobs, opportunities. But for many of us, what we’ve lost is harder to define, though no less real for that. We’ve lost the ability to connect with others. We’ve lost a sense of being embedded within a community of mutual care. Maybe most profoundly, we’ve lost a horizon, a future toward which we can move. It’s hard to know, for me at any rate, just what it is that we can look forward to right now, and when we can expect it. Without that horizon, a kind of eternal present sets in, where the days and weeks start to blend together. And then, with the loss of that horizon, joy itself gradually drains away. It’s not that things are especially terrible. We’re just...languishing. That’s the word a recent article in the *New York Times* used to describe our emotional state at the moment. Not depressed. Languishing...marinating...stuck. To judge by how many times I’ve seen that article cited of late, it seems to be striking a chord.<sup>2</sup> We’ve lost something, and it’s unclear how we’ll ever get it back.

But not everything stays lost. It’s true, some things do. But sometimes, what’s lost has a way of coming back.

It happens that a good many of Jesus’s parables are about searching out what has been lost – and finding that lost thing again. They’re often read as searching for lost people – the wayward and the malcontents, like the Prodigal Son – but they might also be understood as applying to our emotional lives. Indeed, I would argue that they are parables of what it means to lose something, to grieve it, but then also to find it again. Consider the stories we heard earlier in our Scripture readings, about an animal that gets lost, or a valuable coin that is lost, or a pearl of great price that had once been lost. Those are stories about the very real attachments we form with objects, and the emotional distress that we enter when we lose those objects. The shepherd frantically searches for the lost sheep, even at the risk of losing the others in his care. The woman with the coin turns her house upside down to find what she knows to be missing. A merchant in search of fine pearls finally finds the one he has been dreaming of, and he does whatever it takes to acquire that pearl. In each and every one there’s a loss. But there’s also a return.

There are several insights worth observing about these short parables. First, it’s intriguing that Jesus chooses to illustrate his point by singling out not human relationships but other kinds of relationships – with animals, and with inanimate objects that have been invested with a kind of meaning. A child’s blanket, a musician’s instrument, a family heirloom handed down from generation to generation – these are things that form real relationships for us, and Jesus seems to know that. Second, the parables give expression to the emotional distress that can arise when we’re separated from those things. They hint at the grief, the real pain, that ensues when it becomes apparent that the object of attachment is missing. Who but the hardest of heart could argue that it’s anything other than painfully sad when we lose an animal we love? And so we do whatever it takes to find the lost creature. Who can argue that it’s anything but sad when a child loses her special blanket? It’s so sad that sometimes, parents will tromp through half of Boston in search of it. Who could argue with the damage caused by losing one’s instrument the night before an important audition? As in the parables of the sheep, the coin, and the pearl, the pain is all too real.

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<sup>2</sup> See *The New York Times*, “There’s A Name for the Blah You’re Feeling...,” by Adam Grant, April 22, 2021

But then third, the parables indicate that something deeper is going on within that person-thing relationship. The relationship to the object is real, but it's also a symbolic stand in for something greater than the thing itself. When we lose the thing we love, it's actually something within ourselves that is lost. It's a lost future, a lost opportunity, a lost horizon, each of those. But it's also a lost version of ourselves that has gone missing. It's the place within ourselves where it's still possible to have faith, the place within ourselves where it's possible to retain a hope for the future, the place within ourselves that's connected to our deepest source of strength. No wonder the shepherd risks everything to find the lost sheep, and the woman the lost coin. No wonder parents and musicians do the same. It's the search not only for a lost object, but for an essential core of our humanity. It's the search for the place within us where the deepest part of the self resides.

Do you remember the film *Cast Away*, with Tom Hanks? He's stranded for years on a small tropical island, and in his loneliness, he forms a relationship, an attachment, with a volleyball that he names Wilson. It's not at all unlike what children do with their stuffed animals and blankets. Toward the end of the film he loses Wilson, and it's the occasion for a profound, and very moving, crisis. He calls for it. He searches for it across an expanse of ocean. When it cannot be found, he weeps bitterly. For what does he weep? What is it for which he mourns? It's the volleyball, Wilson, certainly, but it's deeper than that. The relationship existed entirely within his own imagination. In relating to the ball, he was actually communing with a piece of himself that he needed to access – the piece of himself that could show love, the piece of himself that could share enthusiasm, the piece of himself that needed to be unburdened of his fears. And so when the volleyball was lost, it's more accurate to say that the man, the castaway, was mourning a lost feature of his own life, one that he would have to search out and find again if he was to go on living. The film ends by acknowledging the depth of the man's loss during his years of being stranded. But it also ends by suggesting that what has been lost can, sometimes, be found again. The volleyball doesn't come back. Nor does everything in his previous life come back. But love might. Human connection might. Happiness, contentment, joy, they might. Sometimes, they have a way of returning to us, like lost objects wishing to be found.

I've so far talked about loss in relation to material objects. I've talked about how they disclose an important part of our inner world that we go in search of. In the time that remains I wish to say something about God, and how, like sheep and blankets, like flutes and volleyballs, God too can sometimes become lost. For many of us, a feature of growing up is to leave behind the part of ourselves that can access faith in God. That's natural, and it might even be a good thing, at least in part. As we mature, if all goes well, we also become more critical in our thinking, and more sophisticated in our understanding of the world. Earlier understandings of God come to seem inadequate, and different understandings of God aren't as readily available. And so, quite often, we leave it all behind. That happened to me at some point in my college years. That relationship with God, cultivated during childhood and adolescence, suddenly began to seem flimsy and altogether inadequate. And so I left it behind, not unlike a child leaving a blankie behind. I experienced it as a painful separation, but it was also a necessary one. Eventually though, the loss began to feel more acute, and I became like the woman turning over her house in search of something valuable she had lost. I talked to people, I read, I studied, and through the intervention of writers I admire - people like Doug Frank, Toni Morrison, and Shusaku Endo - I discovered that faith, that God, returned to me.

Some things are lost, and they stay that way. But some things wish to be found, and they find their back to us.

Maybe that's the way it is in the life of faith. Or maybe yet one more possibility exists. What if instead of casting ourselves in the role of the searcher, turning our houses, our lives, upside down in search of that which we've lost, what if we thought of ourselves as the coins slipped beneath the cushions, the blankie shoved beneath the chair, the flute left in the cab? What if the blankie or the coin was actually...you? And what if the searcher, finally, was God, turning the world upside down to find you, missing you? What if it was God who was rolling through the neighborhood with the windows down, calling your name, hoping you'd hear and respond? What if it was God glancing beneath the subway seats of the world, hoping you were there? What if there was something out there in the world that was desperately trying to get our attention, to get us to notice and respond, because that something was powerfully attached to us, and needed us, like a child might need her blanket, like a musician might need her flute? Might it be so? That too seems to be what Jesus is getting at in these short, poignant parables. God is turning over the sofas of the world in order to find...you!

That pandemic has taken things from all of us. Not only the pandemic – life itself has done that. We've lost things, and a kind of grief has ensued. But what I wish to tell you this morning is that not everything is lost, and not everything will stay lost. A connection with other people, a joie de vivre, free from apprehension and fear, a sense of meaning, a horizon of expectation, a thriving community, justice, faith, God – these are things that have a way of returning, a way of coming back. But maybe, just maybe, we also have a way of coming back to God, who's busy turning the world upside down in order to find us. And maybe, just maybe, like the lost flute and the lost blanket, we too have a way of returning, for as with blankets and flutes, neither do we wish to stay lost.

We'll end where we began, with the song "Joy" from Lucinda Williams. In it, she travels to all sorts of places in search of what she has lost – her joy. "I'm gonna go to West Memphis to look for my joy, maybe in West Memphis I'll find my joy," she sings. Then she goes to Slidell to look for her joy – "Maybe in Slidell I'll find my joy," she wonders. Then comes the refrain: "You took my joy, I want it back." The good news that I want to convey to you this morning is that sometimes, we get it back.