

The Found in the Lost

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

 Joel 2:12-14, 28-29

George Carlin, that great theologian, years ago in one of his routines talked about losing things. The propensity of human beings to lose things. And perhaps to bring comfort Carlin wondered if maybe there was somewhere in the cosmos a place called “the place of lost things”. And that whenever we lost something – something like our keys, or our wallet, or a widowed sock – that the truth was these things weren’t really lost – but that they simply went to “the place of lost things” and they stayed there until they were ready to be found. And that whatever time and effort we put into trying to find our lost things didn’t much matter, because we would only find these things only when they were ready to return from the place of lost things. “It was just here a minute ago!” we say to ourselves, but that was before it decided to go somewhere else; to the place of lost things. And then Carlin would go on to say that maybe heaven was the place where you go to find all the things you lost. I like that idea. Heaven is the place where you go to find all the things you lost. Something to look forward to.

Because the truth is life is filled with losing things. We have been losing things ever since we were very young. “Mom, where’s my sweatshirt?!” “Honey, where are my car keys?” “Young man, where is your homework?” “I thought I parked the car here.” We’ve been losing things from the very beginning and we have been losing things all along the way.

Now the interesting thing that happens when we are looking for those things we’ve lost is that we often end up finding serendipitously other

things. Things we lost long before and forgot about. Or things we never even knew we lost. Looking for your sweater, you find the shirt you forgot you had. Looking for the screwdriver you find the socket wrench set you got for Christmas three years ago. Looking for your passport you find your birth certificate. Looking for the butter you find the three week old potato salad. Sometimes in the midst of what was lost there is something to be found.

And that may be something very important for us to remember because sometimes the things we lose are very important. Sometimes we lose more than the screwdriver or the flashlight. Sometimes we lose people. People we love. Sometimes we lose our health. Our cherished health. Sometimes we lose touch with a friend. Sometimes we lose trust in a friend. Sometimes we lose a child. Sometimes we lose a parent. Sometimes we lose our innocence. Sometimes we lose our dreams. Sometimes we lose our job. Sometimes we lose our spouse. Sometimes we lose our faith. Sometimes we lose our confidence. Sometimes we lose very important things.

Such is the condition of which the prophet of old speaks. The prophet Joel speaks to the people of Judah, the people of Israel and he speaks in the wake of great loss. It’s what the prophets do. It’s really what the Bible does a lot. Speaking in the wake of loss. For Joel he points to the season of environmental calamity brought upon them by the descent of locusts upon the land. Every plant, every tree, every vine has been picked clean by these locusts. Are these real locusts, metaphorical locusts? It may not matter. Simply it was a loss over which they had no control. Nothing you can do when the swarm of locusts descend. You can only count the loss and then, in your grief, wonder why? Why did this happen? How could this happen? It’s the deep existential and spiritual question you’re bound to ask

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when something so important has been taken away. Why God? How God? And seldom are these questions, questions to which we find a satisfactory answer.

C. S. Lewis lost the love of his life just a few years after he married her. And the loss was overwhelming and his questions of how and why felt as if they were cast to the wind. In his memoir on grief he writes, “But go to God when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become.”

Loss comes - it’s a part of being human. It has more to do with being human and less to do with God being God, I think. Sometimes loss is devastating and it makes us want to know why. And we search. It’s what you do when you’ve lost something – you look, you seek, you try to understand.

And then this word from Joel – “The Lord is merciful and gracious – who knows? Maybe he will leave behind a blessing.” “The Lord is merciful and gracious – who knows? Maybe he will leave behind a blessing.” In the loss maybe something to be found?

Many of you have heard me tell the story of the wonderful Christmas Day back when I was sixteen years old and driving the family to my grandparent’s home for Christmas. I was sixteen and filled with vim and vigor and pretty confident with my newly acquired Driver’s Permit. Pretty confident even on the unfamiliar highways of Lincoln, Illinois. When you’re sixteen nothing can happen to you. Except maybe a little ice on the highway and a construction zone – and at fifty five miles an hour -- a telephone pole into which I ploughed our family car along with our family. And the next two hours were filled with ambulances and police and live electrical wires and cracked bones and concussions and abrasions and hospital admissions. I was the only one left unhurt. Unscathed. Until, of course, the locusts came and picked clean whatever worth and confidence I had ever had. No more vim and vigor for me. Until, of course, on the way back home to Michigan in a quickly purchased new family car – my father pulled off to the side of the road and handed me the keys. “Your turn,” he said. “Oh no,” said I. “My driving days are over.” “I guess that means we’ll be sitting here a long time then.” So we sat for a minute with the keys dangling from his fingers and with them a father’s unmerited grace and confidence. Unmerited grace and confidence. In the loss a

blessing. And off we drove with my sweaty palms upon the wheel. I loved my father for that. I loved him in a new way.

In the loss something to be found.

Ernest Gordon in his book *Through the Valley of the Kwai* recounts the horrifying months of the Bataan Death March and the imprisonment for those who survived – stripped as by locusts of every shred of decency they struggled to survive amidst rations barely enough to feed a baby. One of the prisoners, however, had managed to hold onto his little soldier's New Testament and he began to read passages to the rest. And together they prayed and sang quietly. And in the midst of having lost just about everything a strength began to fill them. And then would come the Lord's Supper. Gordon writes,

The elements were of our daily life – rice baked into the form of bread and fermented rice water. The solemn words of the fraction were said.

We broke the bread as it was passed to us and then passed it to our neighbor.

The elements were returned to the Table, a prayer of Thanksgiving said, a hymn sung, and a blessing given. We slipped quietly away into the singing silence of the night, cherishing as we did so our experience of the communion of saints. The Holy Spirit had made us one with our neighbors, one with those at home, one with the faithful in every land, in every age, one with the disciples.

The prophet of old says, “Afterward ... after the loss, after the locusts ... I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions, even on the slaves, even on prisoners, I will pour out my spirit.”

In the midst of the loss, something to be found.

Charles Colson committed the first half of his life to attaining the highest ranks of power – military, law, the White House – only to lose it

all including his soul in the Watergate scandal. To prison he went alone. Stripped as by locusts. “Return to the Lord, your God,” says the prophet, “for he is gracious and merciful.” And what should Colson find in prison? But a call to minister to prisoners. A call to reform prisons. A cause toward which he poured out the second half of his life.

Even on the prisoners I will pour out my spirit.

Do you remember reading George Eliot's great story *Silas Marner*? The story of the man whose heart had grown cold from a series of hard knocks and so sets his life to making money through his weaving and in turn becomes this old miserly, wealthy, lonely and embittered man who sits in his house with his bag of gold coins, protecting himself and his treasure from anyone who might come to steal it. And sure enough someone comes and steals it. And now he has nothing. And every day he opens the door of his little house and stares into the outside through his old blurry eyes hoping beyond hope that somebody might bring his money back. And one day as he is standing at his door staring ... almost in a despondent trance ... a little child that has been earlier abandoned makes her way through the open door into his house and lays down at the foot of his warm fire. Silas finally steps back into the house and through his old eyes he sees something before the fire. He can't quite make it out. The gold locks on the little girl's head, for a moment, makes him think that his gold has returned. But then Silas realizes that it's a little girl. Silas picks up the girl and brings her to his lap and holds her and tries to lull her to sleep. Eliot describes it this way: That Silas began to “feel a certain awe in the presence of (the) little child, such as we feel before some quiet majesty or beauty in the earth or sky – before a steady growing planet, or a full-flowered sweetbriar, or the bending trees over a silent path-way.” Eliot goes on to write: “In old days there were angels who came and took men by the hand and led

them away from the city of destruction. We see no white-winged angels now. But yet men are led away from threatening destruction: a hand is put into theirs, which leads them forth gently towards a calm and bright land, so that they look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child's.”

They look no more backward; and the hand may be a little child's.

There's nothing like this season to make us look back. And who could resist the yearning to capture memories of Christmases past? And in our looking backward there is nothing like this season that might bring to mind that which we have lost along the way. Those important losses. The people. The love. The hope. And the truth that things are not the way they used to be. But in the dark night a star we could not see by day. In the dark night a swaddled baby we would not look for but for the angel's direction. In the dark night the hand of a little child to lead us gently toward a calm and bright land. In the dark night a blessing left by a gracious and merciful God.



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Church of the Palms

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