

God's Lost and Found
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Trinity
Sermon Text: 1 Timothy 1:12-17



I thank Him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because He judged me faithful, appointing me to His service, ¹³though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life. ¹⁷To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

In every city or at every train station there is a lost and found office that takes in numerous lost items every day. These items exist in a kind of limbo because their owners are unknown. The lost and found office is a place full of stories and fortunes waiting to be reunited with their rightful owners. There are bicycles, computers, rings, wallets – all these different objects have one thing in common: they are lost. This Sunday, we will learn about the Bible's lost and found office because in the Bible it's also about lost things. In the Gospel reading today, we heard about the prodigal son and the tax collectors and sinners who are sought out and found by Jesus. As with everything that is lost, the owner must report what was lost and work hard to get that item back, otherwise there is no chance that the item and its owner will ever be reunited. The story of the Bible is one in which God, as a dynamic master, stands up for lost people and His Son specializes in searching for the lost and broken. He wants to miraculously give people who are down and out a path, a purpose, and a future. And Paul reinforces this all when he says: "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.*"

One of the greatest dangers facing Christianity during the apostle Paul's time, and which still threatens us today, is a theory that it is not God who is the seeker and finder, but we humans are. At the time of the apostle, the theory was that there was a spark of divinity in every human being and that the individual only had to set out on a quest to reunite this spark of God with God Himself. We no longer know the exact theories of that time. Nevertheless, we realize that the Christian boat is still springing a leak at precisely this point today, because we always act as if we have to seek God or do something with our lives in order to reach God. Can we do that? "No!" The writer Adrian Plass describes this in a funny story: Someone had once heard that if you truly believe, you can move mountains. The story had inspired him, but he found the undertaking of moving a mountain with faith a little too ambitious. So he first wanted to practice with a paperclip that was lying on his desk. So he prayed fervently, day after day, that the paperclip would move from one end of the desk to the other. But no matter how hard he tried, his prayers were unsuccessful, and the paperclip remained motionless. In this same way of searching, many have despaired of faith. No wonder some people say: "I tried that with prayer, but it didn't work." All of us together have forgotten the purpose of the Bible. It's not about us seeking God nor is it about how much we can pray or believe. Instead, it's about God seeking us. Whoever doesn't understand this has misunderstood the whole point and they quickly fall into either a kind of moralism, a rigorous legalism, or even seek salvation solely in the fact that an aesthetically respectable church service leads to salvation. All these things are not to be completely rejected. But they can lead us astray if we forget that God must launch an incredibly powerful rescue operation in order to save us from eternal damnation. God did this by sending Jesus to us. Jesus came seeking lost sinners. There is a lot of talk about Jesus all over the world, but do we find the One who saves sinners? That is a precious word Paul says, and indeed, it is so precious because it is so rare. This can be seen most clearly in the life of the apostle. Of all people, Paul was probably the one who was least expected to become a Christian. He had dedicated his entire life to ultimately eliminating faith in Jesus from the world and therefore went on a rampage to kill Christians. Of all the people at that time, there was no one who was as determined, convinced, and radically lost as Saul. And God chose Saul, of all people, to save and ultimately make him the apostle to the world. God makes it abundantly clear through the example of the apostle Paul what our place is. Our place is in God's lost and found office, where we can no longer get out unless God brings us out. Through the life of the apostle Paul, God has made it clear once and for all that He is not only able to save but also that He wants to save us. No matter how decidedly lost someone may be, that person may have clearly distanced himself from the church and the Gospel, but no matter how indifferent he or she may be to the message of Jesus Christ, God seeks him and finds him.

I must come back to my initial example from the lost and found office. In the lost and found office, it's clear that things have different values. It could be an expensive computer worth over 10,000 Euros or a doll with a torn-off arm worth 1 Euro. Both items share the characteristic that they are lost. By human standards, Saul was valuable before his conversion. He had obtained a good education and had achieved many things in life. Yet he was lost! Lost because he was far from God. So being lost doesn't just mean that we have made a moral mistake or lost our reputation. Sin can also look classy and even very pious people are basically just as lost as everyone else. I believe that we can always feel this lostness personally. We realize this when we review our lives and ask ourselves the question: "Was that all? Couldn't I have done more with my life?" There are undoubtedly also experiences that we should be ashamed of, experiences and deeds that we hope no one ever finds out about. No matter what experiences we have had or where we are at the moment, God wants to find us, and He makes no distinction between the things we value or value less. We are valuable to God because we are His children and that is the only reason we are valuable. For Him, the doll with a torn arm is just as important as the computer that cost over 10,000 Euros. Of course, we are not talking about things here, but about children. God's children. God goes boldly and with all His might to the lost children and saves them. This is the only reason why there is any hope of ever being found.

In these short sentences to Timothy, Paul wants us to be absolutely certain that God not only wants to save us, but also that He does save us, and that His salvation is therefore certain. If someone wants their things back at the lost and found office, they must first declare what they have lost. Then they have to prove very precisely that the item truly belongs to them. God does exactly the same with us. He comes to the lost and found office and registers us there. He shows that we have clearly come into His possession through baptism in His name. Baptism is, so to speak, the legal document that finally clarifies ownership. After that, there is nothing more to question about our ownership. We must and may be brought back into God's hands. In this short passage, in which Paul gives a very personal account of God's rescue operation, the words 'trustworthy' and 'certainty' and 'deserving of full acceptance' occur again and again. Paul makes it very clear that God's claim and call to us, the lost children, is certain. After God has established His ownership, there is no longer any doubt that we have now come back into God's possession and are His children. As soon as this Word is spoken, everything changes. When God has declared His ownership over us, we immediately enter a different space and a different reality – away from the nameless shelf where all the other lost things are and into God's arms, into His love, into His kingdom. This changes everything. And it also immediately creates space in our hearts and lives so that a new life becomes possible. As soon as we are God's children, we arrive at our destination. In the example of the lost and found office, the dusty computer can be refurbished and used again. And the doll with the torn-off arm can be repaired and given back to the beaming child. Paul felt the same way about his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul understood his conversion as boundless love that radiated completely in boundless love for others. Somehow, God's love always has a special quality in that the vessels into which God's love is poured cannot hold it and His love overflows to others. This is why Paul also recognized his conversion as a commission. He perceived the commission itself as pure grace. Precisely because Saul was probably the least likely person to do this kind of ministry. We would do well to understand that this call of God to us, no matter who we are and no matter what mission we are called to, is always grace. Paul says in these words: "because He [Jesus] judged me faithful." This means that Paul was granted and given Christ's complete trust. It can also be expressed quite simply as follows: "Jesus gives me strength. That's why I can do what I'm supposed to!" or "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

This is what the apostle Paul does and says by repeatedly going to the same lost and found office where he himself was found. Now he is the voice of Jesus and calls the other children home. But Paul does not stay in the lost and found office. He always returns to the arms of the Father, where he joins in the praise of God with many other Christians. In the end, there is praise to God. At the end of time, all of God's people will join in the eternal praise of God and every knee will bow and say that Jesus is Lord. "No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His servants will worship Him." (Rev. 22:3) Then no one need be lost and we can join in with Paul and sing: "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."