

## LOST

A Sermon by Kathy Fuson Hurt  
BUC, October 17, 2010

“I once was lost, but now I’m found.”

We sing the words, typically with some emotion, in that most familiar of hymns, “Amazing Grace.” Composed by John Newton after an experience of nearly being lost in a storm at sea, and after a lifetime of being lost in a series of bad business ventures and unhappy relationships, the hymn celebrates the wonder of being found, how sweet it is to be found when being lost was all there was.

“I once was lost, but now I’m found.”

I have been lost more times than I care to remember, and I am one of those who sings “Amazing Grace” with a special fervor and gratitude for being found. Sometimes I was only minimally lost and only for a short time, as when I relocated to Michigan and had to learn how to do the Michigan left turn, or when or transitioned to this job and had to learn names and faces and places, and to make my way through the time of not knowing, of being lost, as quickly and gracefully as possible. Other times my lostness was deeper and more painful, as when I was lost following the ending of my marriage, or lost following my exit from my childhood religious traditions and all the comfort and familiarity they brought. Sometimes I have been lost so thoroughly and for such a long time that I began to

fear I would be lost forever. I have been lost in my life when I could not find a ministry that called to me; I have been lost in my heart when I fell into the dark space of depression. Each time, when I was “found” once more, whatever form that experience of being found took, I felt the wondrous relief and energy of knowing who I was and where I was going, and why, again. Being found is, indeed, as the hymn suggests, one of life’s greatest blessings, well worth singing about and celebrating.

“I once was lost, but now I’m found.”

Former Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor, in a series of reflections on spiritual practices in her newest book, *An Altar in the World*, makes the argument that being lost itself—not being found, but being lost—can be an important spiritual experience, the sort of experience worth seeking out from time to time. While she begins innocently enough, describing getting lost on purpose on her drive to work, or straying from the path while wandering around her farm property, Taylor moves on to those experiences of lostness that knock the legs out from under us, scare us to death, remind us of how tentative life can be, how precarious our existence is, how little control we have over what happens. And then she has the temerity to celebrate the experience: “you are exquisitely vulnerable in this moment [when you are thoroughly, completely lost]. You are vulnerable *to* this moment. Your carefully maintained safety net has ripped. Your expensive armor

has sprung a leak. You are in need of help, and your awareness of this is not a bad thing . . . . There is something holy in this moment of knowing just how perishable you are. It is part of the truth about being human, however hard most of us work not to know that” (p. 76). Think about the emotion with which we sing “Amazing Grace,” about your own times of being found, and ask yourself: could you summon the same response for your times of being lost? Could you sing about them with a similar passion for which you sing about being found? Does the experience of being lost have its own intrinsic meaning, or is it only meaningful when it opens up into the experience of being found?

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Spiritual traditions of all kinds are full of stories of being lost, so full one might conclude that the state or experience of lostness is part and parcel of a spiritual journey. Read from one perspective, the Bible, especially the Old Testament, is basically a series of stories about individuals and communities who over and over get lost, struggle to find a way out or a way home, only to promptly get lost once more. One of the more famous stories of being lost in the Bible is the Exodus account of the journey of the Israelites from slavery to freedom, a journey that includes decades of wandering lost in the wilderness. After the initial euphoria of being able to leave slavery behind, the excitement of a sudden escape, and the amazement of the Red Sea crossing, reality sets in for the Israelites. How are they

to survive in a harsh desert landscape with little or no provisions for food, with unpredictable access to water? Why did they sign onto such a journey without doing the careful research of determining whether this guy Moses has what it takes to lead them? When one is as seriously lost as the Israelites are at this moment, slavery—an existence in which all the choices are already made, responsibility is taken by someone else, nothing is left to chance—looks pretty good in comparison.

So the Israelites begin, not for the first time nor for the last time, to complain about Moses' lack of leadership skills and to long for their easier existence as slaves. "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Exodus 16:3). And not for the first time nor for the last time, God steps into the story, unhappy with the readiness of the people to give up, but nonetheless willing to demonstrate once more that they do have ample resources available to them if they can only trust enough to use them. "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God'" (16:12). This will be a lesson the people have to learn over and over again, a lesson in trust in their leaders and in their higher power to stick with them no matter how difficult the journey becomes, trust that life is not ultimately the barren desert it sometimes appears to

be, trust that people can be moved by compassion to help, trust that hope and sacred power are present in every situation, no matter how dire.

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This congregation, after many years of enjoying the place of being found, certain of its direction and identity, has been wandering in the wilderness of transition for a time now. While that wilderness has not been without its meaningful experiences and opportunities to celebrate, it has more often been a place of struggle and uncertainty, of financial and leadership challenges, of difficult questions about church direction and priorities. As always happens in the course of such a wilderness journey, the congregation has suffered setbacks, losses of people and resources. The experience of being found, of no longer feeling lost without a settled minister, without familiar staff, sometimes seems as if it will never come again. But like the Israelites, this congregation will have to keep deciding: Shall we try to return to Egypt (if that were even possible), to go back to a former way of being the Birmingham Unitarian Church with the same faces in leadership and the same people on the staff and the same ways of worshipping and functioning? Maybe we should just give up and die in the desert, refusing to make decisions, especially if those decisions involve a change, waiting for the next miracle worker to come along. Or we can decide to keep walking, continue the exhausting journey of transition, in the trust and hope that life and purpose and

creativity can still be discovered, that the congregation has not been called to make this journey in vain.

For Barbara Brown Taylor rightly regards experiences of being lost in the wilderness as fundamental lessons in trust. She writes, “The practice of getting lost has nothing to do with wanting to go there. It is something that happens, like it or not. You lose your job. Your spouse leaves. You lose your home. A child dies. At this level, the advanced practice of getting lost consists of consenting to be lost, since you have no other choice. The consenting itself becomes your choice, as you explore the possibility that life is for you and not against you, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary” (p. 80). Such trust is not something most of us are born with and can summon easily. It will require ongoing practice in order to deepen to the level where we can head off into the wilderness and know God will provide manna as needed, where we can ask strangers for help and believe they will respond with compassion, where we can risk congregational resources and be willing to fail as part of transforming the church, where we can sink into depths and trust that an everlasting love will be just as present in those depths as in the times of success and happiness.

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I will always prefer the being found, and will likely always do everything I can to avoid being lost. That lost experience of disorientation is extraordinarily

difficult for me; I am someone who sets a high priority on remaining in control of my life at all times, under any circumstances. But as Taylor points out, when the times of lostness come I will notice, once my panic subsides, that others who are lost will be wandering in that wilderness as well. And we have the promise that when two or three simply come together, a sacred power will show up in our midst. I may be lost, you may be lost as well. But while we walk alongside each other, we are already on the way to being found once more.