

Proper 19 C

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*Surprising Extravagance*

The wild dog of Willow Grove. That became the nickname of my beloved canine friend Dibley after his adventure throughout the neighborhoods of Willow Grove. Thanks to the power of social media Dibley's picture was shared over three hundred times on Facebook. He was spotted wandering the mall parking lot, at two different parks, and even crossing Easton Road. Four days into the search and rescue mission the phone rang. On the other end was a stranger's urgent voice. No hellos or polite introductions. "I'm looking out my kitchen window and I see your dog in our compost pile. He's a little black dog with a purple leash, right?" Maggie and I rushed to the car and took off towards this woman's house. Maybe this time we could catch him! In vain we spent the following hour creeping along with the windows rolled down, frantically calling out to Dibley, hoping against hope that we would see him, and he would recognize us.

A week after his escape I was pretty much resigned to thinking that Dibley would never be found; but might become a legend as the dog that evaded being caught. And then early on that Saturday morning we got one more call, this time from the Upper Moreland Police Department saying they had just seen our dog behind Giant. It was Daniel's turn to rush to the scene. He arrived to find an empty parking lot. Another search in vain. That was until he caught sight of a black streak darting in front of the car. Continuing our new daily ritual, Daniel rolled down the window of the car and started calling out. Upon hearing his voice, Dibley finally stopped running.

The shepherd leaves his ninety-nine other sheep to fend for themselves in the wilderness while he goes searching for the one that has wandered away. The woman tears her house apart until she finds her lost coin. We all know what it is like to be frustrated by something we cannot find. Consumed by our search. Expending all our energy and time, forgetting our other responsibilities in our maddening quest. "Whether the two situations are totally realistic is not the point," writes New Testament professor Mary Schertz; "the point is that when such a crisis occurs, a

normal human reaction is to marshal all resources and apply every effort to solving the problem. The surprise component of these parables is neither the loss itself nor the diligent search...Normal actions involve relief, repentance and remediation. We vow relentlessly that we will never allow this to happen again. We may share our joy with the immediate family, but mostly we are just relieved that the worst has not happened this time and that we can move on with our lives." During Dibley's great adventure, my emotions ranged from sadness and fear to utter frustration and anger at our "bleeping" dog. And finally, relief. Relief that the worst did not happen. He didn't get hit by a car crossing Easton Road or strangled because his leash got caught on some tree. My sense of joy was only tempered by my fixation on making sure he wouldn't run off again.

As a master storyteller Jesus draws us into these parables of the lost sheep and coin and we think we know where he's going with his message. And then he manages to surprise us by adding a curious twist at the end. The shepherd and the woman rejoice in the return of their lost things by hosting extravagant parties. Who knows? Maybe the woman spent some of her precious coins to host such an occasion or the shepherd slaughtered one of the sheep to serve the finest roast mutton to his guests? As happy as we were at Dibley's return home, I could never imagine putting out one of Daniel's great spreads and inviting all of you over to celebrate. The absurdity of these characters' actions is on full display. Their extravagance, abundance and generosity are expressed most clearly by Jesus in the last of these parables. The one we don't hear today; but know so well. The father rejoices at the return of his irresponsible son by lavishing upon him a feast so great that we're all shocked by it.

None of this makes sense to us. But it makes perfect sense to Jesus. He knows that his father's care is bent towards the return of the lost; his father's mercy bent towards reckless abandon. We crave a sense of order, fairness and justice so that we can make sense of our world as the Pharisees and scribes did. And Jesus turns these beliefs upside down. Those who have been lost and now are found are the honored guests at a feast. The question that Jesus puts to us, is "Who are we to define God's mercy?"

It is in our nature to withhold generosity and compassion and want our God to withhold the same from others; because, at the heart of it, we struggle to believe we

deserve such things. Sometimes, it is hard for us to rejoice in God's love for us. And if we believe we don't deserve it, then why should the irresponsible, unworthy sibling, neighbor or stranger be a recipient of God's unmitigated joy? But this is of little consequence to Jesus or to his father. The lost sheep has returned to the fold. The lost coin is safely back in its purse. The lost son has come home. The lost, wild dog of Willow Grove is peacefully sleeping in the rectory right now. And Jesus rejoices. Instead of grumbling about why we're throwing the party or who it's for, Jesus suggests that we should show up, be surprised and celebrate with him in God's excessive love poured out upon all of us. God, the chief of the search and rescue mission will never cease in searching us out when we're lost. And God the party planner extraordinaire will never cease in celebrating our return. Even if our own grumbling never ceases.

*Amen.*