

A SEEKING CHURCH: Finding Lost Sons and Daughters

By Patrick Wooten

Both of the boys had enjoyed every minute of swimming, fishing, and building sandcastles; but, as every parent of elementary-age boys knows, the beach is a stressful place. If I had said, “That’s far enough” once, I’d said it a thousand times as they inched further into the deeper water and bigger waves every time I wasn’t looking.

Our week was coming to an end. We were packing up coolers and towels and fishing poles for the last day of our family vacation. I scanned the beach like I had done every minute or so for the last week, but something was missing—our 6-year old boy, Luke. We immediately started screaming his name, running up and down the beach, and, finally, wading out into the surf. (Stay with me—this story has a happy ending.)

Jodie and I were in panic mode. It’s crazy, but even as I was yelling and searching, my mind was racing ahead to what happens if the worst possible scenario played out. Life would change forever. I would have given everything I had and everything I would ever have, including my own life, just to find him. After what seemed like hours (it was really only a couple of minutes) down the beach about a hundred yards, Luke popped up from behind a rock about the size of a suitcase. He was grinning from ear to ear because his practical joke had hit its mark. He had fooled us.

Luke has always been funny, but he quickly realized that his attempt at comedy didn’t sit well with Mom and Dad. I later quoted my own father after I had pulled a similar stunt as a child: “If I hadn’t been so happy to see you, I would’ve killed you myself!” Well, I let Luke live, and I learned a valuable lesson about God’s love for His lost children: He just wants them to be found. It breaks His heart when His children are aimless and wandering. It breaks His heart when they take a wrong turn in some dark alley and can’t find their way home. He wants them to be found.

Somewhere along the way every local church decides, whether consciously or unconsciously, what they will do about lost coins, lost sheep, and lost sons (see Luke 15). We choose between “Ah, they’ll find their way home when they’re ready” and “Where are they? Let’s go get ’em!”

I am certainly not saying the church I serve is a model for every other congregation to follow, but we do work hard to be a soul-finding church. We haven’t always been focused on finding souls, but we are getting better every day. We’ve learned firsthand some lessons the Bible teaches about finding lost things.

1. Lost coins are always lost in dark places.

It’s our job to help them become acclimated to the light. Ever have someone walk in your bedroom in the middle of the night, flip on the lights, and scream “Surprise!?” It’s shocking, startling, disorienting, and just plain frightening.

That’s what happens when a lost coin (person) is snatched out of a dark place. Yes, it was a dark place, but it was a familiar place. This whole church thing can be confusing for a newbie. We

can't expect a newcomer to understand our culture the minute they walk in. It's our job to turn the light on, but not the interrogation light.

Instead, they need the warm, comforting light of Jesus. We are all looking for a smile. Maybe we should remind ourselves how we feel in an unfamiliar room, around unfamiliar people, doing unfamiliar things; then we'll know how to make things a little less intimidating. Church should be welcoming, not frightening.

2. Lost sheep need to hear a voice they understand.

Remember going to Starbucks the first time? You can't order a "large" like you do at McDonalds. It's a venti if you choose coffee, but if you choose a large tea, it is called a trenta. It's like a secret code that only the cool kids know about. I like to think of myself as relatively aware of modern culture; but every time I order a simple cup of coffee, I have to stop, think, and look for sample cups on the shelf behind the . . . What's she called? Oh yeah, the barista. Only then can I proclaim, like a kid who just recited his multiplication tables for the first time, "Venti; yes, I'll take a venti."

Then they always have that next question ready to throw in my face: "What kind?"

"What kind of what? I just want coffee! Just give me coffee! Church should not feel this way!"

The greatest compliment I ever received as a communicator was the Sunday morning a totally unchurched 21-year-old approached me after service and said, "I understood everything you said. You didn't use any big words." I responded, "That was easy because I don't know any." It was my reminder to Keep It Simple, Stupid.

Let's never change the Gospel message, but let's be sure we aren't leaving people confused by speaking in code. In the church world, we use words that are never said in any other walk of life— words like salvation, sanctification, Sunday school, Redeemer, Jehovah, hymnal, prayer warrior, and born again. We should use these words but let's explain as we go.

A few years ago we were trying to make the turn from being a "feed the sheep" church to a "find and feed the sheep" church. I thought I was doing a pretty good job of communicating the Gospel until a doctor's wife, who had been attending Sunday morning for a few months, asked, "Patrick, what is this 'born-again' thing you keep talking about?"

I was both excited and heartbroken. Excited that I would get to share the Gospel on a personal level. Heartbroken that I had done such a lousy job sharing the message of Jesus.

Before using one of "our" words, I try to ask this question: If I said this word with no explanation to one of my unchurched friends, would they understand? If not, I have some work to do.

3. Lost sons come home dirty.

When Lazarus was raised from the dead, Jesus did the heavy lifting. Then He said to those around the newly alive Lazarus, “Loose him, and let him go” (John 11:44). It’s a beautiful picture of discipleship. Getting cleaned up takes time.

Do we have a plan for “dirty sons”—a way to help them leave their addictions behind, walk away from their bad habits, and learn about Jesus?

It’s all about relationships. Are we building relationships? Sometimes people fall right back into the pigpen they came out of. What happens then? The soul-finding church is waiting with open arms, just like the Prodigal Son’s father.

We have to create a culture of soul-finding. We need to celebrate the activities we want repeated. Celebrate the people we want mirrored. Celebrate the types of testimonies we want to hear again and again.

Baptism is our biggest celebration. Whoever thought of the baptism t-shirt is a genius. Everybody who gets baptized gets a free t-shirt. Before baptism we remind everyone that we don’t do quiet, dignified baptism. We do loud, rowdy, and proud baptisms. We celebrate. We put pictures of baptism everywhere.

We encourage people to get out of their seat with their smartphones and livestream to their friends and family. Baptism is a touchdown, and we celebrate! At our church, it’s become the most important symbol of changed lives, and we’re seeing it repeatedly.

Just like me, you would have done anything to find your son on that beach. But are we willing to do anything, no matter how uncomfortable it might be, to find God’s lost sons and daughters?

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