

# And God Said, "Amen"

Luke 15:1-10

July 5, 2009

(ORDINARY TIME)

*I lift up my eyes to the hills --  
from where will my help come?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.  
He will not let your foot be moved;  
He who keeps you will not slumber.  
He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.  
The Lord is your keeper;  
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.  
The sun shall not smite you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
The Lord will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.  
The Lord will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and forevermore.*

My third grade teacher's name was Willa Mills. She looked a lot like Hazel the housekeeper on TV ... This was back in the days of *Lawrence Welk* and *Lassie* and *Leave It to Beaver*. Back in the 1900's. We called her Mrs. Mills, because that's what she told us to call her. But older people, who were not in the third grade, just called her Willa. Or Miss Willa, they called her. And she was a really good teacher. One of my favorites. Because she actually *liked* us. Told us what wonderful students we were. "The best third grade class in the

county,” she said. And we believed her. Because Miss Willa Mills would never, never say anything that wasn’t the truth.

She had a paddle, of course. They had them in those days. Mrs. Mills kept hers in a drawer. And every now and then, if we were misbehaving, she’d open the drawer. And she’d put the paddle on her desk. And that was it. The room would fall silent. and all you could hear was the sound of our number two pencils copying down the words she had put on the blackboard.

And the funny thing is no one ever saw her use that paddle. If somebody misbehaved or was way out of line, she didn’t take a swing at them. She didn’t have to! She’d just say what she had to say, firmly and gently. And then she’d put her arms around them and hug them and say, “You’re a good boy (or a good girl). Don’t forget that,” she’d say. “I want you to stay that way.” And that did more for us -- much, much more -- than a paddle ever could.

And Miss Willa Mills was always quizzing us, always checking, always asking questions. “To sharpen your noggins,” she’d say. One day, I remember, she asked one of her fine pupils (not me, but another fine specimen) a question about natural history -- science, I guess, with a little geography in it, to boot. The kid’s name was Cletus. He was CB to everyone else, but to her he was Cletus. “Cletus,” she said, “tell me... Where might I find an elephant?”

And he had to think about that. He looked up at the ceiling for a moment. “Where would an elephant be found?” That was a tough one. And then all of it sudden it clicked. He had it! “Mrs. Mills,” he said proudly, “An elephant is so big you couldn’t lose it to begin with!”

Some things, I guess, are more easily lost than others. And not nearly so easy to find as an elephant in a third-grade classroom. Things like money, for instance. Somebody asked Yogi Berra, once, what he’d do if he found a million dollars on the street. “Well,” he said, “I’d find the fellow who lost it ... and if he was poor, I’d give it back.” Makes you wonder doesn’t it? Just what did

Yogi Berra lose? Or can you really lose something that wasn't all there to begin with?

Deep questions they are. Deep, challenging questions. But here's a deeper one: What about people? When somebody's lost, where might you find them? How might they be found? ✕

A little girl named Meghan was lost. She was four years old and as lost as a four-year-old could possibly be. And in a grocery store, mind you. A super-sized supermarket. They were shopping for Sunday dinner -- when the whole family would gather together and ask the Lord's blessing and do what families do best. And *she* got to go and help do the shopping.

But it wasn't what she thought it would be. She was tired and a little bored. And she was trying to stay close to daddy just as he told her to -- before they got there. But she dawdled just a bit by the frozen food case, because she wanted to see her breath. And she spent five minutes (at least) in the breakfast aisle trying to read the back of a *Captain Crunch* box. And by the time she skipped into the produce section, her father was nowhere in sight. So little Meghan sat down by the bananas and started to cry. And there she sat lost...and alone...and afraid.

One of the stock boys saw her there and asked her why she was so sad. And she wiped her tears, looked up at his face, and repeated her name, address, and telephone number. It's what her daddy taught her to do if she ever got lost. And it wasn't nearly as good as seeing her father, but somehow it did make her feel a *little* bit better. And she said it again and again ... By the time she finally saw him running round the corner, she had repeated her full name and address and telephone number to the produce manager, three stock boys, a cashier and four senior citizens.

And as soon as she saw him her courage melted. (Kind of like the chocolate bar the store manager had given her to try and make her feel

better.) And her father swooped her up in his strong arms and held her close, and said, “Meghan, Princess, I’m sorry I lost you.” And the little girl said, “Daddy, I’m sorry you lost me, too!”

And everyone laughed ... and then they applauded. And her father promised he would never lose her again. And you know what? He never did.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills --  
from where will my help come?  
My help comes from the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.  
He will not let your foot be moved;  
He who keeps you will not slumber.  
He who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.  
The Lord is your keeper;  
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.  
The sun shall not smite you by day,  
nor the moon by night.  
The Lord will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.  
The Lord will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time on and forevermore.*

Sounds like somebody’s **father** he’s talking about there. Like Meghan’s father. Someone who loves his little ones so much he’ll do whatever he has to do never to lose even one of them.

Jesus said that about our Father, too. Said it to some people, O guess, who were a little like Meghan. People who sometimes felt all alone in a very big place. People who were just lost in the world -- and in **life**, I think. And he said it to some other folks who were good, decent, church-going people. They were devout, clean-living people who just couldn’t understand why this

wandering rabbi (named Jesus) wanted to be so close to those *other* people. The kind of people God would surely not be happy with: swindlers, and frauds, and home-wreckers, and hookers ... *prostitutes*, mind you.

He said what Meghan's father said to *all* of those people. Only he said it with a story. It was a story about a farmer. A shepherd, really. And the shepherd, he said, was out shepherding his sheep. Out on the hills, I suppose, where the sheep could graze. And he was *with* them, you know, because sheep get lost by themselves. They start nibbling away at the grass. And they nibble and nibble and never look up. And the next thing you know they're lost.

And I sympathize with the poor creatures. I do. Because it happens to me all the time. Patrick will walk along beside me down the sidewalk or in the parking lot at the mall, with Ann (and sometimes Kristof) three feet ahead of us. And Patrick will talk and I will listen. And the next thing you know we hear voices -- familiar voices -- in the distance saying, "Where are you going?" or "Wake up guys!" or worse. Because multi-tasking (or doing more than one thing at a time, like walking and talking,) is not something that comes naturally to us.

So ... a sheep nibbles along and never looks up. And when it finally does it sees that the others are not where he expected them to be. So the shepherd goes with them ... to keep watch over the flock and keep them together.

But sometimes -- every now and then, I suppose -- the Shepherd will gather them all together there in the wilderness and count them. Just to be sure he hasn't lost some of them along the way. He counts them one by one. (A person could fall asleep doing a thing like that.) "Ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one ..." But it isn't there. There should be a hundred. One of them is missing. One of them is lost and all alone ... In the *wilderness*, mind you ... where a wolf could find them, or a mountain lion, or a snake. "What would you do?" says Jesus. "I know what you'd do"

The shepherd, he said, will leave the ninety-nine where they are and he'll go and search the hills till he finds the lost sheep. And when he finds it, he'll lift it up in his arms and carry it round his shoulders. He'll carry it all the way back to the flock. And when he gets home, he'll tell his friends and neighbors to come celebrate with him. It'll be like the Fourth of July. They'll have a cookout, maybe or a feast. And they'll rejoice. "You'd do it, too," he said. "You'd be glad that the lost one was found."

Oh, and there were the "good" folks -- the clean-living, church-going people. And there were the others -- the hard-living people. The swindlers, and frauds, and the street-walkers, mind you, who had gathered there to hear Jesus. And he looked at them. And he looked at the others. And this is what he said. He said, "That's how it is with our Father. There is more rejoicing in heaven over one lost person, one sinner who repents, than there is over ninety-nine godly, clean-living people who don't need to turn to him."

It's like a woman who loses a coin. One little coin. It probably wasn't worth a nickel. Truth is people would wear them like jewelry. Put a hole in a few coins and some beads of clay or wood and string them together ... and it was something to wear! Brides would make a headband out of them and wear them at the wedding.

But a woman loses one of the ten. It's only one and not worth a lot, really. But she searches all over, lifts up the rugs and sweeps under the bed... turns the place upside down till she finds it. And when she finds it she can't wait to tell all her neighbors and friends. "I found it! I found it! Come celebrate with me!"

And he said it again. **"That's how it is with the angels in heaven. There is joy in God's presence when even one of these 'lost ones' is found."** And for those who'd lost their way in life, and those who felt all alone in a very big world, and for those who were like sheep among wolves, it was good news. Wonderful news! Those little stories said, **God loves you. He does. And like a**

father or mother who comes running to gather their little ones in their arms, he'll come to you ... and hold you. And this is his promise: **I WILL NEVER LOSE YOU.**

And to the others -- the good, clean-living folks who were decent and devout -- it said the same thing. **God loves you. God doesn't ever want to lose you.** And it said something else to them, I think. It said, **Look at the others. The hard-living people. The frauds and the streetwalkers, the wretched refuse, the "trash" of this world. Look deep and see that they're people, too. They have hurts and fears and deep wounds in their hearts. And remember -- God loves them, too. His heart breaks at the thought of losing even one of these "little ones."**

So welcome them. Receive them. Invite them to the table. And when they come to your church, rejoice. Rejoice. Because you may not hear it, but that's exactly what happens in heaven when they do. And more than that, it said, ***They're lost out there and all alone. Help me change that. Help me love them and bring them back to the fold -- back to the One who loves all of you more than you can even imagine.***

One flock, one Shepherd -- isn't that what he wants? Jesus said it himself. **It is not the will of my Father that even one of these little ones should be lost.**

Let me tell you about one of his little ones who was lost and alone. Johnny was his name. And Johnny was my grandma's youngest grandchild. There were nineteen of us. And Johnny was the baby. His sisters were the twins. (I think I've told you before how they would stick their feet under the door when it was closed, and make me guess whose toes were whose.)

And Johnny was a good kid and everyone liked him. But when I was alone with grandma she'd say, "We need to pray for Johnny" or she'd tell me that she really worried about him." I thought it was because he was so ornery. Or

maybe because he was so little. But it wasn't that, at all. Johnny's dad was an alcoholic. I didn't know that. Not many folks did. Because he was friendly and funny -- always "telling tales," as my grandma would say. And things at home were not good.

Johnny had two sisters -- twins -- who were a bit older. (There was a closet door in my grandmother's house that didn't quite reach the floor. So there was a gap of an inch or two between the bottom of the door and the hardwood floor. And the twins, Kathy and Karen would go into the closet and shut the door. And they'd stick their toes out under the door and have me guess which toes were whose.)

For some reason, I don't know why. But for some reason Kathy was the good girl. She was the smart one. The pretty one. The one they were proud of. But Karen and Johnny never quite measured up in their eyes. (As if love and care is something you only get when you're worthy of it.)

And over the years it took its toll. Johnny didn't do well in school. And he started cutting classes and hanging around with a pretty rough crowd. And from there he started drinking. My guess is he was an alcoholic before he was even old enough to buy it. And from there he turned to drugs. Hard drugs. And things at home fell apart, I think. And Johnny moved out.

We'd see him every once-in-a-blue-moon, I guess. And then we heard [more than once] that Johnny was in jail. Kathy, his sister, was in nursing school at UNC when I was in seminary at Duke, which is not far away -- eight miles, I think it is. And every Friday or Saturday evening we'd have dinner together. And she'd talk about Johnny. She resented him, she said. Because he had hurt them so much. He embarrassed them, and shamed them, and broke their hearts. And you can't blame her. She dealt with all the problems by working really hard at everything she did. And she did well.

And Karen tried hard, too, I think. But just like Johnny, she didn't measure up. She could do better, they told her. The truth is she was gifted. An artist she was. And she was the curator of a large museum in New Orleans.

But Johnny was just lost to the world. And he was homeless. He was in his late thirties, and homeless, and addicted to drugs and alcohol. And then, maybe six years ago or so, his ex-wife called and said that somehow she learned that Johnny had cancer. And she looked for him. She couldn't live with him, at all. But she still cared for him. And she found him and took him to a hospital.

And Kathy said, for years, that she never wanted to see him again. But a few weeks later, she made the trip to Florida and took him home to Virginia...

Eight or ten weeks later, in July of 2004, I had Johnny's graveside service at the Jones cemetery. And at the end of the service, Kathy said, "Tom? Can I say something?" Well, of course she could. And she talked about Johnny and how she had resented him and even hated him because of what he had done to their family. But when she went to the hospital in Florida, she said, she found someone she had never known. The hospital staff, nurses and doctors, and all the other patients who had gotten to know him loved him. He was a blessing, they said. A source of courage and laughter and hope.

And she said, "In these past eight weeks I have come to see my brother as someone who was loving and kind. People who got to know him said he never complained. In fact, they told her that Johnny was the kind of fellow who'd give you the shirt off his back." And she told us how she and her brother had talked about all that had happened. And how a neighbor had abused him and wounded him deeply. And they talked about God. And they talked about heaven. And Johnny told her not to be afraid because he would be there with people who love him and with God.

And through her tears she said, “Johnny taught me that there’s so much more to people than what we see. That underneath all the hurt and pain and even the trouble they’ve caused, there is a person -- someone who wants what we all want. Someone who can love and be loved.”

And she ended it by saying, “There are other Johnny[s] all around. Don’t ever give up on them. Because they are a blessing.”

And I couldn’t quite *hear* it. But it was there. I’m sure it was there ... the Voice of our Father, saying, “Amen.”

**Open your hearts. Reach out in love. Welcome them home.**

**[For] It is not the will of your heavenly Father that even one of these little ones should be lost.**

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

*Benen. OblSB*

