

God, Life and Everything Lost and Found

There we were, rifling through an overflowing four-foot tall cardboard box. I pulled out a dirty sneaker. Then another that didn't match. My wife pulled out first one then another black winter jacket. Why are all the jackets black this year?

And then there were the jeans - yes jeans - and book bags with any number of textbooks. When we finished digging through the box, we went straight for the hand sanitizer. I mean, I'm a slob, but some of the stuff in there was too gross for even me.

What disgusting job were we doing? One that many parents are familiar with: going through the high school's lost and found.

Granted, our son said he had already looked, but who trusts a 16-year-old to do a thorough job of any unappealing task, let alone search through other people's stuff? As it turns out, we didn't find what we were looking for, either.

When our son told us he had lost his jacket, we cried to the heavens, "Why us?" Apparently, it's because we have children.

By the looks of the lost and found box and the utterly unsurprised look on the school secretary's face, I'd say half the school has lost something at some time or other. From appearances, I'd guess that most of the lost stuff never makes it to the lost and found, and most of the stuff in that box never gets picked up.

Every school I've ever attended or visited has a Lost and Found. Actually, nearly every public place has one. Heck, we even have one at our church, and believe me, the stuff we find tells me that it's not just the kids who are careless with their belongings.

Hats, gloves, socks (not kidding), umbrellas (we have a drawer full of those), glasses, cameras ... we've had them all. And yes, we have had coats. About the only thing nobody's left at the church is an iPad - people seem pretty protective of their portable electronic devices.

I thought I had put that lost-and-found box diving incident behind me when it came flooding back into my memory this Sunday. Our artist-in-residence group, Spirit of Unity, had just sung two beautiful pieces, when one of their members stood in the center aisle and took off on a sax solo of "Amazing Grace."

I stood at the altar listening, then realized I was unconsciously singing along, "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see." Then I looked out at the congregation and thought, "This is the Lost and Found."

Out in that congregation was a motley collection of people from a wide variety of backgrounds, some battered by life, some new and fresh, some unmatched and bewildering. All lost in some way or other.

That's what John Newton was getting at when, as he reflected on his own life, he wrote down those words. A former slaver, he knew what it was to be a lost soul. Miraculously, he also learned what it meant to be found - to know who you are and why you are here, to know where you belong and to be there.

Each one of us is at some point in that same boat - we feel isolated, confused, hopeless, lost. That's where churches come in.

We are the Lost and Found. We are the place people go when they don't know where else to turn, hoping against hope to regain their center as it were.

The difference is, we are also the place where those who know they are found choose to stay. Because when they look deep enough within, they discover that this is where they belong - in a community of love looking up to God, within to themselves and across to their neighbors.

And as they stay, they reach out to others who are lost, welcome them in. It's not always pretty in our churches, but it is a place where you can know you belong.

And that's a lot better than that box in the school office.