

Who Found Whom?

The love affair of Americans with their dogs is as American as, well, forgive the cliché—motherhood and apple pie. Americans will permit the smelliest pooches to share their beds or their finest steaks and will react in outrage if some rogue mistreats a dog in public.

President Bush won the 1988 election, I am privately convinced, because he revealed that he sometimes shared the shower cubicle with his spaniel Millie. Millie herself then became a best-selling “author” with a canine view of the Bush White House in *Millie’s Book: As Dictated to Barbara Bush*.

In short, dogs are exceptionally close to many of us, definitely members of our families. For Christians, it’s sometimes even a theological issue urgently posed by small children: Will Rover or Max or whoever be with us in heaven when he dies? So when a dog gets lost, some of us plunge into great dudgeon and even pray with great urgency.

It happened to me last month when Chester, our 11-year-old Golden Retriever, wizened with age, wandered absent-mindedly off through an open door into the neighborhood. Cold weather had already barged into Virginia, and poor Chester’s survival instincts seemed rusty.

Near panic in the Aikman household—there ensued an almost house-to-house neighborhood search. Nothing.

But something happened next that brought me up with a definite aha moment in my Christian thinking. Just after I had taped up early on Sunday morning the second of my forlorn, handwritten notices: "Lost, Golden Retriever, Chester, whitened with age, etc.," I happened to turn around.

There, stapled firmly onto a wooden trash basket just feet away was a beautifully printed page with a color photo of our bewildered elderly canine and the words: "Found dog, Golden Retriever"—complete with a phone number.

A good Samaritan already had taken in Chester from the cold, then set off to locate his owners and lessen their anguish. Remarkable. My notice had said "Lost," but an even earlier notice announced "Found."

Isn't that exactly the way God has announced salvation to our own lost human species?

We blunder through life until we gradually realize we don't know where we are or where we are going, throw ourselves into panicked searches for truth, peace and whatever, only to learn that the Lord foresaw it all long ago and has already announced that He has found us. We ought never to forget that it was God's grace that placed the key to His kingdom before us.

God's incredible love for humanity is demonstrated, we learn in Romans 5:8, by the reality that Christ died for us "while we were still sinners" (NKJV). God already was tacking up His own notice, "Found," before we had even become fully aware of our own plight as "Lost."

It is not surprising that one of the most beloved of the Bible parables told by Jesus, that of the prodigal son, has the wayward son's father expressing overwhelming compassion for the humiliated youth on his way home when the youth was still a long way off (see Luke 15:20).

Why bring up these truths? Because as we begin 2001 our nation seems poised on the brink of a new era of acrimony and finger-pointing, while conflicts overseas could spin dangerously out of control, particularly in the Middle East.

As we face the perennial national challenges to our sense of truth, justice and freedom, it is all too easy to allow our political preferences and grievances to evolve into harsh moral judgments. These deny others the very grace we ourselves have received from God.

God's grace in no way excuses us from demanding accountability for wrongdoing and pursuing justice wherever we can. But it softens the blows, reduces the partisanship and reminds us that the forgiveness we received from God far outweighs the moral penalties all of us have deserved.

Our nation needs a lot of forgiveness and reconciliation right now, and overseas problems cannot be addressed by instant and slapdash responses. Christians need to remember with prayerful gratitude the notice that says "Found" even while we petition God for the "Lost."