

Luke 15:1-10 *Lost and Found*
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama
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The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

So he told them this parable: ‘Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

‘Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’

From Jesus’ parables and from our own lives, we know that there are many ways to become lost. Today, we heard the parables of the sheep that wanders off and of the coin that has been misplaced, but this passage doesn’t actually end where we stopped reading today. If we were to keep going in Luke, the next words would be, “There was a father who had two sons”—the familiar story of the prodigal.

So many ways to be lost.

First, consider the sheep. When a sheep gets lost, it’s purely an accident. It’s not looking to run away—it just doesn’t have a very good sense of direction. That’s something that can happen to any of us—especially here! I don’t know how anyone ever gets anywhere in Birmingham without a GPS, and even Siri gets it wrong, sometimes.

In the same way, life gets confusing. Fake news, shifting values, changing rules—we may be trying to take the right path, but it’s not always easy to tell which one that is. We don’t mean to go astray, but at the end of the day, as darkness begins to

fall, we discover that we don't know where we are, or how to find our way home again. We are lost.

Sometimes, though, people get lost because of someone *else's* mistake. It's like with the parable of the coin. When a coin gets lost, it's not the coin's fault. A coin can't control its own movements. When a coin gets lost, it's because of someone else's actions. Think of a foster child who is subject to abuse, who is bounced from home to home, never able to form a real bond with anyone; and then, when she turns eighteen, she's suddenly out on the street with no home at all. She may go astray in other ways, but the real cause of her lostness lies with someone else, not with herself.

But then, take the prodigal son. Actually, take both sons, because they are each lost in a different way. You know the story: the younger son goes looking for trouble. He cashes in his inheritance early and hits the road, doing all the things he was raised not to do—drinking, gambling, hiring prostitutes. His actions are unrecognizable as those of his father's son.

As for the older brother, he stays put, but he's lost inside. When the younger brother repents and returns, we see by the way the older brother resents his father's joy, that though he's been *physically* near his father, he has never trusted the depth of his father's love for *him*, has never grasped what a blessing it is simply to *be* with his father.

Now, my guess is that all of us have, at different times, been lost in each of these different ways—though different ones of us may specialize more in one way of being lost than another. We've each had times when our lives have gotten confused, and we've made decisions that distanced us from God and from others without intending to. Other times, we are lost because of our own actions, or our own bitter attitudes.

And we've each had times when someone *else* has caused us to be lost. Last Tuesday was the eighteenth anniversary of the attacks of 9/11; today is the fifty-sixth anniversary of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church that left four little girls dead, less than a mile from here; and every day we are subjected to stories of shootings and drone strikes and terrible acts of abuse at our own borders. Some days, this whole world seems lost. With so many people capable of such cruelty, and so many victims not just here, but all over the globe, it can make many people doubt that there is a God; and it can make those of us who do believe in God, think that God has written us off—and maybe even ought to.

But then, we read these parables. The stories are triggered by the Pharisees' shock and disapproval at seeing Jesus eating and drinking with sinners. But Jesus responds: "Which one of *you*, if you had a hundred sheep and one got lost, wouldn't leave the ninety-nine behind to go looking for the lost one?" And then, "And what woman, if she had ten silver coins and lost one, wouldn't sweep the house until she found the one missing coin?"

The Pharisees assume that God rejects the lost ones. Jesus says, no: God longs for the lost ones. No matter what caused them to go astray, God doesn't give up on any of them. God doesn't give up on the confused sheep, or the misplaced coin, or the wayward child, or the resentful one.

God's heart aches for every lost soul. That means that God's heart aches for the perpetrators of terror who've been led astray by bitterness and hate; God's heart aches for the victims in the rubble and their families who mourn them; God's heart aches for those on the sidelines who watch with horror, wondering what to do. Every one of us is beloved, and God wants every one of us back.

And so, because there are so many ways to become lost, God offers just as many ways to come back home.

For the sheep, the shepherd goes out, calling its name, knowing that when the sheep hears his voice, it will answer with relief.

For the coin, the woman sweeps the room carefully, thoroughly, looking in every crack and crevice and corner for the smallest glimmer.

With the prodigal, on the other hand, the father actually restrains himself from looking. He knows that you can't force someone to come home when they're not ready. The father practices patience, until the son "comes to himself." That's an important phrase—it doesn't say that the son "comes to his senses," but that he "comes to himself." There are a whole lot of people in this world who need to "come to themselves"—need to remember who they are, the child of a loving God. And when they do come to themselves and return home in repentance, the father is ready to welcome them back with open arms.

As for the older brother, standing outside the welcome-home party with a bitter heart, the father once again practices patience. He tells his son how much he loves him, and then proves his love by waiting outside *with* him, because there is no joy for him until all of his children are in the celebration, together.

So, a shepherd who seeks, a woman who sweeps, a father who waits. God has been, and continues to be, all of these things for us, depending on what we need.

To be lost is a terrifying thing—but no matter how we got there, Jesus assures us that God is not looking on us with the cold eyes of rejection; instead, God is looking *for* us with longing and patience and persistence and love.

God will continue to seek and to sweep and to wait, until the day that we are all safely home.