

Proper 19, Year C

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[Exodus 32:7-14](#)[Psalm 51:1-11](#)[1 Timothy 1:12-17](#)[Luke 15:1-10](#)**Lost Without God's Grace**

There may be no worse feeling than losing something important; and maybe no better feeling than finding it again. Today's parables reflect on what we sing about in the hymn "Amazing Grace," "I once was lost, but now I'm found"; the pain of losing, and the joy of finding.

Many of us are prone to losing things. I know sometimes I will momentarily panic if I've lost an important piece of paper, my reading glasses, or particularly my phone. It's got all of my contacts, my calendar—there's a lot of crucial information stored in it. And it also has a GPS, because if there's one person who can get lost in our fair city's twists and turns it's me. That GPS helps me find my way often—I'd truly be lost without it. Maybe you've felt that sense of panic at losing something, too. Then, there's a real feeling of relief when it's found.

A friend of mine has this wonderful little device called a "Tile." It's for anyone who is prone to losing things they need regularly. It's a small plastic square that you can attach to your keys or place inside your wallet. Using an app on your smartphone you can see if you're close to the object. When you're within earshot it makes the square beep so that you can find what you've lost. This is just one of a myriad ways that we invest both time and money into "preventing the loss of valuables and avoiding being lost." As one person wrote, "People place microchips in pets, include street maps in smartphones, and

employ Amber Alert systems to locate lost children rapidly. There is no one exempt from the pain of losing something made precious by time, devotion, or love.”¹

What do you feel you’d truly be lost without? What would cause you great pain if you lost it? Whatever that thing is, can you imagine that God feels the same about every single one of us? That as diligently as you might search for your own lost child, that God searches us out with the same kind of intense longing and love? God is always seeking out the lost, and celebrates with great joy in the finding.

This is a wonderful little pair of parables we’ve just heard that are about being lost and found, which actually come in a set of three. I’m glad these two—The Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin—are set apart this morning, because it’s the third parable about being lost that usually gets all the attention: the Parable of the Lost Son, aka The Prodigal Son. But this little pair also deserves attention. One of my old teachers once told us something wonderful about the gospel of Luke. He explained that the oldest manuscripts of Luke would have been written on scrolls. These three parables about being lost and found again are in chapter 15 of Luke, and when written on a scroll they would have appeared at the dead center of the scroll. When you unrolled it from either side these are the first stories you would have seen. The stories are smack dab at the heart of what Luke wants us to know about who Jesus is and how Jesus loves. Together, all three tell us something about God’s desire to find the lost, and God’s value for “sinners” being as high as God’s value for the “righteous.”

¹ Christopher H. Edmonston, *Feasting on the Gospels (Kindle Edition)*, ed. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, *Luke, Volume 2, Chapters 12-24*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), Loc. 3231-3235.

Luke's gospel often makes distinctions between the righteous and sinners. Now, it's true that we're all sinners, and that even those righteous Pharisees who are grumbling at Jesus are sinners themselves. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," as Paul, our patron, reminds us. Luke tends to paint things in more black and white terms to get his point across, so just bear with the image. It actually is quite helpful because here, and elsewhere in Luke, we begin to notice that Jesus has somewhat of an affinity for those wretched sinners.

The Pharisees provide the setup for Jesus' parable as they note this affinity Jesus has for "tax collectors and sinners." Tax collectors, you'll remember me saying before, are bad in the world of scripture because they are Jewish people collaborating with the Roman authority. They collected taxes for the occupying army, and usually did a little shaking down of the citizenry in the process, so they were seen as greedy traitors to their own people. Sinners could mean any number of undesirable things, take your pick. The point is, they weren't the kind of people you saw in church on Sunday, nor would the religious elite have welcomed them. Yet, here's Jesus, welcoming the unwelcome, breaking bread with traitors and thieves. As the religious elite, the Pharisees, good church-going folk like you and me, grumble about Jesus' company, he reminds them about who it is he's come to save. It's not the people *in here* who seem to have it all together—even though you and I both know that's not really the case anyway, whatever we might think—it's the people *out there*, the ones we'd rather not be seen with. So, in Jesus' Parable of the Sheep, the good, self-righteous religious folk become the 99 sheep left to fend for ourselves while Jesus heads out searching for one old scraggly sheep that we wouldn't even give the time of day.

Why would the Good Shepherd do this? Because, as crazy as it may sound, that one, wayward sheep is just as important to Jesus as we are. Whether we like it or not. And when Jesus' good shepherd finds that one wayward sheep, that's when the party gets started. There is great rejoicing in the finding, great relief of what is so highly valued by the shepherd being brought back into the fold.

When I was in high school there was a kid I'll call John, and he was a jerk. He was one of the more popular kids, and he used to tease me. I couldn't stand him. That's why I was so glad that he left our school between my sophomore and junior years and moved to another city out of state to live with his dad. While he was there he got mixed up with the wrong crowd, and during our senior year he shot and killed another kid at his school. In a way it was an accident from what I heard. John found his dad's gun, and he and his friends wanted to scare this kid with it so they could take his radio out of his truck and get away with it, I suppose. Things got ugly. John meant to shoot him in the leg . . . but that's not how it ended up. John went to prison when he was 17 years old.

John used to come to our church from time, and so the people there knew him. I remember one day some of the adults in the Baptist equivalent of coffee hour talking about John. They talked about how one of the older ladies had been driving up to see him in prison, reading the Bible to him, and trying to lead him to Jesus. They said things like, "What a shame. That boy's life is over! Poor kid. I wonder what we can do for him?" Even though I didn't like John I never figured him for a killer, but I have to admit a part of me thought things about him like, "I knew it. That kid was no good." So, as I stood there in the fellowship hall that day listening to them pity him I couldn't hold it in. "Poor John?" I exclaimed. "What about that kid he killed? What about that kid's parents and

friends? John deserves whatever he gets in prison. How can you all stand there and pity a murderer? You ought to be ashamed.” And I stormed out as the adults just looked stunned.

Part of me was right, of course. John did something horrible, and it was appropriate that he face the consequences of his actions. Justice needed to be served for the boy he killed. But, on the other hand, I was wrong. Those people were mourning something lost that day. John was lost, and through these people God was searching him out. Through the eyes of Christ they saw a lost sheep who needed saving; all I could see in my self-righteousness was a sinner. Could I have been more Pharisaic? I still wonder sometimes—would they have been so eager to reach out to John if they’d not known him personally? Maybe. Maybe not. We’re always willing to ask for mercy for ourselves and people we love, and yet tend to expect justice in the case of everyone else.²

There’s an old Jewish story about a good, hardworking farmer:

The Lord appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given double to his neighbor. The farmer, scarcely believing his good fortune, wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately he received a hundred cattle, and he was overjoyed until he saw his neighbor had two hundred cattle. So he wished for a hundred acres of land, and again he was filled with joy until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God’s goodness, the farmer could not escape feeling jealous and slighted because his neighbor had received more than he. Finally, he stated his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye. And God wept.³

Sometimes, like the Pharisees, we have a hard time rejoicing in the goodness God shows to others, just like I couldn’t rejoice in God’s grace working through those adults in my church for John. We cannot understand why God would love *those* people, or why

² R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 9, *Luke, John*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 298.

³ Culpepper, 298.

we should be expected to love them as well. Our sense of things is that everything should be fair. Well, as I've preached before, grace ain't fair. That's why it's grace! It's God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved. That grace is something to celebrate wherever we see it offered, be it to us, to others, or to those we perceive to be wretched sinners. Paul, our patron, celebrates that grace in the passage from the first letter to Timothy that we heard this morning. He writes, "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost."

The gospel is not for the righteous, it's for sinners. Of whom you and I along with Paul are the foremost, whether we think of ourselves as such or not. It is only by God's grace that we have a share with the righteous at all. Maybe if we look hard enough at ourselves we'll find we don't really deserve that grace either. Then maybe we'll be glad grace isn't fair, that God is unfair in our favor all the time, and that God loves each and every one of us enough to seek us out even in our brokenness. Rejoice in that grace wherever you find it active, because the truth is we'd be lost without it.

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