

September 11, 2022
"Lost and Found"
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 / Luke 15:1-10
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Many of you know that the Calvary office has long been a de facto lost and found for the building. When stuff gets left here, it ends up in the Calvary office. Before we installed the carpet, this past winter, the office was filled – and I mean filled! – with people's lost stuff. Piles of lost items. Or in some cases, maybe, intentionally left items. For God only knows what reason.

Thankfully, installing the carpet meant we had to finally get rid of all that stuff – though those of you who spend any time in the office know that the trend continues. There's not a week goes by that I don't come in to find some new thing - a hat, an umbrella, a child's purse, all unidentifiable – just left in some random spot in the office. It's like magic. It's like the Land of Misfit Toys. It drives me crazy!

I've always been struck by how often whoever lost something never bothers to come back looking for it. Or even calls or emails the office to ask if whatever thing they've lost has turned up. Some of the stuff I get, but a lot of it seems kind of important; at least meaningful or useful, even if not valuable. Just apparently not important enough.

How fitting that on a day we celebrate as "Homecoming Sunday," the lectionary gives us two parables on being lost and being found. You can't come home, of course, unless you've been away from home.

The third parable that goes with the set, that we didn't read, is the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which we explored back in March. A story of a son who wastes everything his father has given him but at last comes home, welcomed by his wastefully loving father with a party.

We're only looking at the first two parables this morning, but it's important to acknowledge the context in which Jesus offers all three. A familiar context for Jesus, with Pharisees – the self-avowed keepers of Jewish law – grumbling, grumbling, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." The nerve!

Jesus is hanging out with tax collectors and sinners – tax collectors singled out, as they often are, as perhaps the most despised members of the Jewish community in 1st century Palestine. Both because they were Jews who collected taxes from fellow Jews on behalf of Rome, the Roman Empire, the occupying foreign power; and because they were notoriously dishonest in doing so.

Tax collectors and all the rest of the sinners. I hear you grumbling, Jesus says, so listen to this. A math problem, if you will.

A shepherd has 100 sheep. He loses 1, leaving him how many? 99, that's right. Ninety-nine's still a lot, you say. What's one sheep, you ask? Well, according to the shepherd, it's worth everything. He goes after the one lost sheep until he finds it. UNTIL HE FINDS IT, whatever it takes, as long as it takes. And when he does, he rejoices – and not only that, he brings the lost sheep home, HOME, and invites all his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him.

“Just so, I tell you” Jesus says, looking right at the Pharisees, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.”

And then imagine a woman who has 10 silver coins, 10 drachmas. She loses one, leaving her ... nine drachmas, that's right! Very good. She proceeds to turn the house upside down, doing so until she finds the lost coin. A single coin with very little value. And she, too, rejoices when she does. And invites her friends and family to do the same. That's how valuable the coin is to her. Can you even imagine, Pharisees?

If not, Jesus says, use your imagination. Love trumps – sorry, it's painful to even use the word. Love eclipses, supersedes, outshines law. EVERY SINGLE TIME.

The first parable invites the Pharisees in 1st century Palestine, and now us in 21st century Philadelphia, to see ourselves in the shoes of the shepherd. “Which one of you,” in the shepherd's place, “would not (also) leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost?” Until you find it?

Or having 10 silver coins, which one of you wouldn't turn the house upside down until you find the one lost coin? Which one of you, indeed?

From the "found" perspective of the righteous 99, it can be easy to point fingers at the one who is lost. We like to draw the lines, don't we, conveniently placing ourselves on the righteous inside of one divide or another – clearly distinct from the sinful outside. But these are not stories about insiders and outsiders, "non-sinners" and "sinners." In fact, I would argue that at least part of the lesson here is that there are no insiders and outsiders. These are stories about sinners; just sinners, like, you know, all of us. Which is to say, all of us who so often – and so consistently, consciously and otherwise – TURN AWAY from love. Love of God, love of each other, love of ourselves. Love.

The lost sheep is not some sinful outsider; remember, the lost sheep ALREADY belongs to the flock. That's why the shepherd leaves the rest of the flock to find it. The lost coin already belongs to the woman. That's PRECISELY why she turns the house upside down to find it. There are no insiders and outsiders, righteous and sinful – we are also the lost sheep and the lost coin. We all live in some degree of perpetual lostness.

Contrary to the dramatic conversion of a slave-ship captain we sing about when we sing "Amazing Grace," we were not ONCE completely lost and NOW completely, and finally, found. We are, at best, a perpetual mix of lost and found, of blindness and sight.

In process, containing multitudes, in need of repentance. Which is to say, turning BACK, turning AROUND, again and again, toward love. Toward God, each other, ourselves. Seeking – and seeking to be found by – love, as we prayed earlier. So that we might love more fully. God, each other, ourselves.

"Lostness," as Debie Thomas writes, "remains a central feature of my relationship with God. ... It's not that we cross over once and for all from a sinful lostness to a righteous foundness. We get lost over and over again, and God finds us over and over again. Lostness is not a blasphemous aberration; it's part and parcel of the life of faith."

Amen to that! There is comfort to be found in that understanding. There's no sense pretending, kidding ourselves. In fact, as Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, we can benefit

from treating lostness itself as a spiritual discipline. A spiritual practice. A potential teacher of vulnerability, empathy, humility, patience, determination, courage, resilience. Lostness teaches us who we really are.

In her book, *An Altar in the World*, she writes: "Popular religion focuses so hard on spiritual success that most of us do not know the first thing about the spiritual fruits of failure."

We know there is religious, cultural and social shame attached to failure. To getting lost, being lost, lostness. Most of us, if not all of us, are understandably uncomfortable not knowing where we are or where we're going. On the road, GPS relieves that anxiety for many. But it also denies us the potential and unexpected gifts of lostness.

As Barbara Brown Taylor goes on to write, "And yet if someone asked us to pinpoint the times in our lives that changed us for the better, a lot of those times would be wilderness times. When the safety net has split, when the resources are gone, when the way ahead is not clear, the sudden exposure can be both frightening and revealing." Lostness, she suggests, makes us "stronger at the edges and softer at the center."

Frightening and revealing, to live as fully into our lostness as we do into our foundness, trusting that God does God's best work when we are desperately lost and can't even find ourselves.

We know what it is to be lost. To feel lost. "It means we lose our sense of belonging, writes Debie Thomas again, "we lose our capacity to trust, we lose our felt experience of God's presence, we lose our will to persevere. Some of us get lost when illness descends on our lives and God's goodness starts to look not-so-good. Some of us get lost when death comes too soon and too suddenly for someone we love, and we experience a crisis of faith that leaves us reeling. Some of us get lost when our marriages die. Some of us get lost when our children break our hearts. Some of us get lost in the throes of addiction, or anxiety, or lust, or unforgiveness, or hatred or bitterness. Some of us get lost very close to home – within the very walls of the Church. We get lost when prayer turns to dust in our mouths. When the Scriptures we once loved lie dead on the

page. When sitting in a pew on a Sunday morning makes our skin crawl. When even the most well-intentioned sermon sucks the oxygen out of our lungs. When the table of bread and wine that once nourished us now leaves us hungry, cranky, bewildered or bored."

We all know what it is to be lost. Part of the good news of these parables is what they remind us about ourselves when we are. Namely, and fundamentally, that we are worthy of pursuit. Hear that! We are worthy of pursuit because we are God's beloved. We already belong, even when we don't feel like it. Even when we don't want to be found. The whole is not complete without our part.

The further good news of these parables is what they reveal about the nature of God. Lostness also teaches us who God really is. God is none other than the shepherd who risks leaving the 99 sheep to find the one that is lost. Whatever it takes, as long as it takes. God is the housewife searching every last corner of her house to find the one coin that is lost. Whatever it takes, as long as it takes.

The 13th century Sufi mystic, Rumi, wrote that "What you seek is seeking you." That is called grace. Grace that precedes repentance. Grace in knowing that even when you're so lost that you can't or won't see or seek God, can't or won't see or seek love, God is STILL seeking you. Love is always seeking you.

God is the One who grieves when we are lost, who feels loss when we are lost. When we feel disconnected. When we feel alone. God is the One always on the lookout for us, always pursuing us with goodness and mercy, as the 23rd Psalm reminds us. God is the one who treasures us. Always rejoicing, celebrating, like nothing else could possibly be so important, when we return to our belonging. When we are found yet again. When we come back home.

And not only that, these parables point us to where we can find God – which, of course, is also where we so often find Jesus. Among the lost. The last. The so-called "least." In the wilderness.

If we want to find God, we have to be willing to seek the lost AND get lost ourselves. To welcome and eat with sinners.

Debie Thomas again: "If Jesus's parables are true, then God isn't in the fold with the ninety-nine insiders. God isn't curled up on her couch polishing the nine coins she's already sure of. God is where the lost things are. God is where lostness reigns. God is in the darkness of the wilderness, God is in the remotest corners of the house, God is where the search is at its fiercest. Meaning: if I want to find God ... I have to leave the safety of the inside and venture out. I have to recognize my own lostness, and consent to be found." Again and again.

Perhaps this is what Jesus means when he says we have to lose our lives, for his sake, which is to say for the sake of love, in order to find our lives. We have to seek out the lost within ourselves, the lost or neglected parts of ourselves, in order to find ourselves. To find God in ourselves. We cannot be found until we are lost.

And knowing what it feels like to be lost, we are also called to seek out the lost among and around us in order to find ourselves. In order to find God. In order to love like God.

We have to pursue and engage each other's lostness, like God does, like Jesus did, while also acknowledging and embracing our own. So that we might all be found again. The we might all come home.

From his poem, *On the Edge of Night*, the Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (REEL-KUH), writes:

*And what has lost its way
will, by my vibrant sounds,
be at last brought home
and allowed to fall endlessly
into the depthless source.*

May it be so.