

**September 15, 2019 | Sanctuary worship service**

**TEXT: [Luke 15:1–10](#)**

**TITLE: Found and Lost**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Three well-known parables make up the whole chapter of Luke 15. There's the sheep that goes astray, the coin that is lost, and the son who becomes a prodigal. The characters in these stories are also well-known. For example, in the two parables we just heard, there's Jesus, the wise storyteller; the Pharisees and other self-righteous folks grumbling off to the side; a flock of 99 sheep who stay in the right place; a wayward 100<sup>th</sup> sheep who foolishly goes astray; a shepherd (who represents God in the first parable) and a woman (who, interestingly, represents God in the second parable); a stack of nine silver coins (probably drachmas, which I'll mention so that you know I passed my Greek classes); and a solitary silver coin that rolled away and got lost in the shadows. This cast of characters is ready to describe what it's like to be lost and found. In fact, that should be the sermon title: "Lost and Found."

In looking at the plot of these parables, they too are well-known and fairly straightforward. Jesus (it goes without saying) is good; the grumbling self-righteous folks are bad. The 99 sheep are basically good and doing what the shepherd wants; the one wandering sheep is the problem here. Likewise, the nine coins are good and where they're supposed to be; the tenth coin is the problem, having gotten lost somewhere in the woman's home. Except coins don't do anything by themselves. They aren't alive or rational beings. That coin is lost through no fault of its own. This doesn't easily fit with the other "lost" parables about a wandering sheep and the later, prodigal son. Maybe it's best not to focus on this parable too much and just pay attention to the sheep story.

OK, God as the good shepherd. Since preachers don't know much about tending sheep, we grab our reference books. It turns out that sheep are notorious for eating grass down to its roots, so in an arid climate, they have to cover a lot of territory to find enough to eat. It's not like the sheep meant to get lost. It was simply doing what sheep do. And once it realizes that it's separated from the flock, a lamb will typically find a place in which to hide—shelter away from predators. It's hard to blame the sheep for going astray. And now think about the shepherd for a moment? How can it be a good idea to leave 99 sheep unguarded in order to seek out one lost lamb? Sure, Jesus may do something like that, but are we really be expected to follow his example? It doesn't make good business sense to put our entire investment at risk for a 1% problem child.

So perhaps it's better not to focus on those biblical details too much. Let's stick with good ol', familiar American evangelical theology. There are the lost in this world who need to be found. The word of God, a Billy Graham crusade, the singing of "Just As I Am", and a welcoming Presbyterian church are how the lost find their way home. We wish they wouldn't stray; thank goodness we are all right—we, the faithful flock of 99 and the nine coins safely here within God's house.

Oh, no, I just noticed there's a typo in the bulletin. Somehow the sermon title got reversed. It actually says "Found and Lost." How dare something disrupt the order of things I've always believed about these parables!

By calling these stories in Luke 15 the "lost and found" parables, we have tended to focus on certain words to the exclusion of others, like "sinners" which appears four times and "repentance" which appears three times. Yet the words "rejoice" and "joy" appear five times in these first 10 verses. And all three of the stories talk about a celebratory meal in which the community comes together. Remember, Jesus first told these stories because a group of religious folks were grumbling over the entourage Jesus had around him. They were angry that Jesus associated with sinners and such. Perhaps the parables are less about finding the lost and more about getting the found to rediscover what it means to celebrate as God's children of grace and mercy.

Let's look again at the inverted sermon title: "Found and Lost." Here's the detail that is too often overlooked. In principle all 100 sheep start out "found," just as all 10 coins begin as "found." It is not as if everyone starts out "lost" and has to make their way into "foundness." That's the first misconception. Second, the quality of "lostness" is not something intrinsic to the 100<sup>th</sup> sheep or the 10<sup>th</sup> coin. They are "lost" simply because they are the object of someone else's search. God seeks us, desires us to be within the flock, safe in the purse, a part of the community. On that day, Jesus told these parables as much for Pharisees unable to celebrate as he did for sinners who'd wandered from God's ways.

Initially we are all found. God created us and called us good. And yes, it's true that we wander due to our nature, like hungry sheep, or due to circumstances beyond our control, like a lost coin; and yes, sometimes because of foolish, misguided choices, like a prodigal son. We end up lost. But that lostness is not who we are fundamentally. The "lostness" is in reference to the God who constantly, persistently searches for us and longs for us to remember we are found. Like the shepherd dashing away from the flock to find us, like the woman with her broom sweeping every corner of the room, we are sought for by God so we might joyfully celebrate as part of God's "found" community.

The action is coming far more from God's side of the equation rather than from ours. It is salvation by God's persistent grace, not by our good works. Bible scholar Ken Bailey made a brilliant point about the first parable. He said that the shepherd's choice to go after the lost sheep is critically important to the other 99. If it would ever be OK to sacrifice one sheep—to just let the one lamb stay lost—then every single person in the remaining flock would be insecure. Every other sheep would know that if, for some reason, they happen to wander off or get distracted or do the wrong thing, they are expendable and will be left to die. When the shepherd leaves behind the 99 and takes the great risk required to find the lost one, the shepherd is actually offering the profoundest security to all the others.<sup>1</sup> Seen from that perspective, we rest in the knowledge that the task is never about determining who is worthy of being in the flock but rather to remember how diligently God in Christ acts, searches and saves, so that

we are able to welcome one other—Pharisee and tax collectors, saints and sinners - into one community. When that happens, there is joy in heaven and on earth.

How does this faith perspective play out in real life? A recent *Post-Gazette* Letter to the Editor commented on the problem of homeless people in downtown Pittsburgh. The writer wanted more armed security patrolling the Cultural District; wanted “loitering and panhandling to be discouraged, not tolerated because those who need help have many social service agencies available which patrons of the Cultural District already support. Panhandlers should be directed there.” In that language, it was easy to recall a similar speech usually heard around Christmas—a raspy male voice asking a man soliciting donations for the poor: “What, are there no prisons or workhouses? Those who are bad off must go there and thus decrease the surplus population.” The Scrooge-quality of the letter writer is full of grumbling from a perspective of “many are lost and only a select few are found.”

By contrast, South African icon Nelson Mandela wrote a letter to a senior prison official in which he said, “I detest white supremacy and will fight it with very weapon in my hands. But even when the clash between you and me has taken the most extreme form, I should like us to fight over principles without personal hatred, so that at the end of the battle, whatever the results might be, I can proudly shake hands with you as an upright and worthy opponent.”<sup>2</sup> This is the perspective of “all are found, and by God’s grace, we are able to move from “lost isolation” to restored community. And all heaven rejoices when that happens.

Our Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith begins with these words: “In life and in death we belong to God.” There is no asterisk next to the word “we”—no qualifying phrase to suggest that it only applies to some people. We (all of us) are found—first and foremost. God longs for us all, seeking us when we are distant, so that we might again be together with God and one another. That’s the point of these “found and lost” parables.

If I am truly found, held by a loving shepherd, I can let go of all the world’s demonic language that tries to convince me I’m lost. If everyone I see is also found, loved by a mothering God, then what is keeping us from coming together at one table, as one community, united as recipients of the same saving and amazing grace? What indeed! My prayer is that each of us will hear these words spoken over us, our church, and our world: “Rejoice, for the sheep that has been lost, the coin that has been lost, the communion and justice that has been broken and lost at last has now been found. In this there is much joy amongst the angels of heaven and all the people of earth.”

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal*, InterVarsity Press, 2005, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Nelson Mandela, *The Prison Letters of Nelson Mandela*, ed. Sahn Venter; quoted NYT Book Review, August 5, 2018, p. 16.