

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

**TEXT: [Luke 15:1–10](#)**

**TITLE: Two Sides to the Story**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Our theme for this month is “Mirror Images.” It is the reminder that there are two sides to every situation. There is how we see ourselves and how we are seen by others. There is the version we like to believe and the other version that is less sympathetic. And as we’ll see with today’s scripture lesson, there is a commonly held version of what it means to be lost and there’s a different version as seen from the perspective of Jesus—the one who finds us, bring us home, and invites us to join in the heavenly celebration that follows.

The parables in Luke 15 are commonly lumped together under the heading of the “lost parables” as in the sheep that is lost, the coin that is lost, and in the next parable we didn’t read, the prodigal son who becomes lost. Ultimately, I’m not so sure that is the true point of these parables, but I’ll get to that in a moment.

Let’s start by asking ourselves: For whom did Jesus tell these parables? Was it for people who were somehow outside God’s community—the sinners and tax collectors mentioned in the first verse? No, the parables were told for the folks in the second sentence—the “Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” In those days, Jesus ate with a lot of different people, including some who were critical of his ministry. And by and large, the Pharisees didn’t mind eating with Jesus. They had issue with some of the people in Jesus’ entourage. They didn’t like the company he kept. In their minds those undesirable folk were “lost” and hadn’t earned the right to be “found” at the same table with them. Yet Jesus refused to buy into that mindset. Jesus never persecuted a sinner in the gospel. More often than not, Jesus spoke to them respectfully, offered healing or hope or whatever was needed, and then invited that person to join him at the table. It was that behavior that the righteous religious leaders found objectionable. And while they were so anxious to talk about sinners and repentance, Jesus five times in this passage talks instead about joy and rejoicing. Definitely two sides here to the same story.

How do we untangle these dueling perspectives? Well, let’s start by really looking at the items described as lost—the 100<sup>th</sup> sheep and the 10<sup>th</sup> coin. Palestinian sheep need to cover a lot of ground, since they nibble the fresh grass down almost to its roots. So it’s not unusual for them to wander off. And if they do get lost from the flock, they are at risk from lots of predators, so they tend to hide – to lay down under bushes and find shelter wherever they came. The 100<sup>th</sup> sheep getting lost is really due to its biological nature—both in its eating habits and survival defenses. What about the silver coin? A silver denarius was valuable—worth about a day’s labor back then. But a coin has no free will. It can’t intentionally roll away or hide. It was relatively small and it could fall off a table and hide in the shadows of the uneven earthen floor of a poor woman’s cottage—especially since many homes didn’t have windows in them.

It is illogical to blame the coin for getting lost, and it is unreasonable to fully blame the sheep simply for seeking fresh grass according to its biological nature, even if this meant it wandered away from the flock. Are there other ways we get lost that need to be seen from a new perspective? Sometimes a crisis happens in our life—a sudden illness at home, losing your job—and in that moment you don't know where to go. You make choices based on limited information or a weak emotional moment and it ends up sending you down the wrong path. Like the sheep, you did the best you could but it turned out badly. Like the coin, fate intervened and for some reason beyond your control you found yourself separated from others.

In a similar way, sometimes things change in our lives and the goals we cling to no longer make sense to us. There's an old Jewish legend that describes how when Moses was climbing down Mount Sinai with the two stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments, Moses had no trouble carrying them, even though they were large, heavy slabs of stone and the path was steep. Even though they were heavy, God had written on them and they were a precious gift for the Hebrew people. But when Moses came near to the base of Mt. Sinai, he saw the people dancing around the golden calf worshiping a false god. In that moment, according to legend, the words disappeared from the tablets. They became blank slabs of stone again and now were too heavy for Moses to carry. So he dropped them and they shattered at his feet.

We can bear almost any burden if there is a meaning to what we are doing. But without that meaning, burdens become too much and we give up on trying to reach our goals. We stop moving forward. We get lost emotionally, spiritually, and feel far from home.

In addition to these examples—getting lost by nature, getting lost by circumstance, getting lost because of twists of fate causing life to lose its meaning—there are times we got lost simply because we're stubborn and full of false pride. Back in 1995, a banker named Nick Leeson worked for Barings Bank of London in their Singapore office. He made speculative investments that earned the bank a lot of money, but he hit a bad spell and racked up a lot of debt. He tried to get out the hole by risking a billion dollars of the bank's assets on whether the Japanese stock market would stay in a narrow value range overnight. It was a terrible decision, and when his bet failed, Leeson's reckless vanity caused the entire 230 year old banking institution to come crashing down into bankruptcy.

A biblical example comes from the days of King David. At the height of his power, David had conquered the neighboring countries and was the undisputed ruler of the region. Yet he forgot to trust in God alone, and one day he summoned his army commander Joab and instructed him to go through all the tribes of Israel to take a census of the people. More importantly, this census would tell him how many soldiers were available to fight for him, as if David's might came from military power instead of God's power. This was a serious sin against the will of God. David lost his way and brought down destruction upon his own people.

So what does it mean to be lost? We can list off lots of different ways this can happen: By being a sheep who strays in a foolish but understandable search for food (or when we make bad decisions that led us astray). By being a coin who gets lost in the shadows through fate and circumstance (or when something bad happens to us for which we aren't to blame). We get lost when the things we value in life suddenly are taken away from us and we lose heart (like when Moses had to drop the Ten Commandment tablets or a medical diagnosis drops us to our knees). Or we get lost like Nick Leeson or King David, when our vanity and stubborn pride prompts us to do the very thing God knows we shouldn't.

But if we stay on this side of the mirror—if we only consider being lost from the perspective of whether we are to blame or not, and whether my “lostness” is worse than your “lostness,” then we won't make any spiritual headway on this subject. Being lost is not just a question of location—being home vs. being lost. No, being lost also means someone is searching for you. Being lost is defined by the fact that someone is actively looking for you so you can get back where you belong. That is a totally different perspective. That's the real starting point for these parables in Luke 15: God is seeking all of us. In fact, God is seeking all people. They are all equally the object of God's search—prompting God to leave behind the 99 to go after the 100<sup>th</sup> sheep, or to grab a broom to sweep the whole house to find the 10<sup>th</sup> coin. We are all being sought by God. That's the fundamental good news and message of hope. We are sought by God, wherever we are right this very minute, so that the connection with God—the oneness with God's creation and others in God's human family—may be reestablished. And when this happens, the heavens rejoice and the earth is filled with joy.

Go back to where I started with this sermon. Jesus was dining with some religious officials and noticed them grumbling because of the folks in his entourage – the sinners and tax collectors and ne-er-do-wells in Jesus' immediate circle. So he told them about God the shepherd seeking the lost sheep, and God the homemaker who swept the house until she found the lost coin. God searches for us – longs to connect with us and for us to share table fellowship with one another. All the guests around Jesus—Pharisees and tax collectors—were equally lost, because all were being sought out by a loving, searching God. And when they find themselves able to sit down together in love and fellowship—Pharisees and tax collectors, sinners all—then there is greater joy over those persons being found than over the 99 who were already at table.

We are actively sought by a loving Savior. We are welcomed into a community that includes all, a table wide enough to hold far more than we can ever imagine or understand. Accepting that good news is how we move from “lost” to “found.” Trusting in that may the angels above us and the church around us right here say together: “Amen.”