

Get Lost

Luke 15:1-10

Sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's, Austin on September 11, 2022

In August of 2012, a tour bus style sight-seeing trip near the volcanic Eldgja canyon in Iceland went sideways. When the group returned to their bus, someone announced that one woman was missing. The police were notified and everyone in the tour group was enlisted in an impromptu search party. They searched well into the night. A helicopter was being prepared by the coast guard to join the effort the following morning when finally, at 3 a.m. they found her . . . among those in the search party.

You see, the “missing” woman had, at some point during the hike, separated from the main group, and presumably because of a change of temperature, changed clothes. And when someone back at the bus announced they were missing the “Asian woman wearing dark clothes who spoke English well,” she simply didn’t recognize herself in that description. She was wearing light clothes by then. Perhaps though others thought she spoke English well, she was not at all confident. The poor woman, along with everyone else, was looking for someone she would never find.

When we’re reading these parables from Luke’s Gospel, it’s important that we don’t make the same mistake. We must not fail to see ourselves in the description of the that which is lost. And, it should be said, that’s harder than it sounds. Within the world of the parable, it’s easy enough. The lost sheep is the main character. They’re not lost for too long. There is much rejoicing on their behalf. But in our daily lives, it is much more difficult.

Who are the lost sheep and coins in Jesus’ immediate context? It’s not a mystery, the text tells us. It’s tax collectors and sinners who were coming near to listen to him. Pharisees—religious and political authorities — grumbled in the back saying ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ Sinners are the lost sheep and the lost coins. Who are our modern-day equivalents to tax collectors? It’s not really those who work at the IRS. As yourself, Who in our society is almost universally despised? Who are those whose work maintains the structures of oppression and injustice in our society? Sinners and those people. Do we really want to see ourselves amongst such a company?

Of course we don’t. We have it all together. We pay our mortgage on time; in fact, we are considering doing a little renovation. Our children get good grades in school. We have an immaculate vacation planned for the holidays.

But a terrifying truth this parable invites us to confront is that underneath all that put-togetherness, all that confidence and mastery, all our impenetrable pretending, that at a deeper, more fundamental, more existential level, we are lost. That we need saving.

If these parables aren’t enough, our other readings say much the same thing. Consider the Psalm: “*The Lord looks down from heaven upon us all, to see if there is any who is wise, if there is one who seeks after God. Every*

one has proved faithless; all alike have turned bad; there is none who does good; no, not one." As does Paul in our reading from 1 Timothy: *The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*

This is why 12-step groups are so powerful and so effective. They all start the same way. *Hi, I'm Zac, and I'm an alcoholic.* The first thing I want you to know about me is my name. The second thing I want you to know about me is that I do not have it all together. Both parts are important. Saying your name first makes it clear that you are more than just your mistakes. But the second part names that you have no illusions about being perfect. It gives everyone else in the room permission to also not be perfect. It levels the playing ground.

I wonder how it would change us if we started every church service the same way: *Hi, I'm Zac and I'm a sinner.* Actually, it does. Have you noticed? *Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.* If that language is too fancy for you, let me translate it into non-church speak: *Dear God, since I was last in church, I fricked it all up again. Help me again. Amen.*

The first step in following Jesus is knowing you're lost. I said it's difficult. But perhaps you don't have a hard time seeing yourself as lost. Perhaps you're too well-acquainted with your own lostness.

Well, for you, here's another question: Are you more of a sheep or a coin? You see, a sheep is a creature—some might say a particularly dumb one—but the main point is that it's a creature with a will of its own. It can wander away of its own volition. I wonder if you've wandered away of your own volition. I wonder if you have regrets. If there are things you've done in the past that you have never really gotten over.

A coin, on the other hand, can't lose itself. I wonder if you feel like you haven't wandered away from God as much as God has lost track of you. Maybe there's things that have happened in your life that you had no control over whatsoever that nonetheless left you feeling like God had abandoned you. I wonder if there's things you wish never happened. Because the consequences of those events have left you feeling alone in this world, hidden somewhere that no one may ever find.

Here's the good news the parables have - whatever kind of lost you are, God is looking for you. If the first step in following Jesus is admitting you're lost. The second step is being found. It's as simple as that. The Christian life is just that cycle over and over again. God is a shepherd who has left the other 99 sheep behind to come look for you. As if you were the only sheep in the world that mattered. God is a woman lighting a lamp in the darkness, sweeping the entire house, and searching carefully until she finds where she lost track of you. On September 11th, we lost 415 emergency workers in the twin towers, such as firefighters who climbed into a burning building to rescue those were lost. Some of them taking multiple trips in and out. Those men and women are pictures of Jesus.

I want you to notice two more things in both parables before I end. First, notice nothing is ultimately lost. God finds everything. You may feel like you have wandered too far away. You may not be able to imagine what ever

the first step to moving in the right direction would look like. Just stay where you are. God is looking, and it's not a matter of if, but of when.

Second, in both parables, notice God is a fool. I'm no shepherding expert, but I have a hard time imagining that abandoning 99 sheep to fend for themselves in order to go looking for one sheep that will probably only wander away again is what good shepherds generally do. And surely it cost more than a single silver coin to throw a party for all your friends and neighbors to celebrate the finding of that one silver coin? The woman ends up with less money than she started with—and she's happy about that?

This is the extravagant foolishness of God. It's called grace. It doesn't matter what kind of lost you are. It doesn't matter how impractical your predicament. It doesn't matter how far you've wandered or for how long. God is looking. And God loves looking. The parables are unambiguous. God will not stop looking until he finds you.

And it gets even better yet. *There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine persons who need no repentance.* This is the double good news. Not only does God find the sheep, God doesn't berate the sheep for being lost. God doesn't tell the sheep to do better next time. If the first step of following Jesus is admitting you are lost. And the second step is being found. The third step is throwing a party. A party with God, friends, neighbors, and even angels. And it's that cycle over and over again.

Amen.