

FIRST LESSON: Ezekiel 34: 11-16
SECOND LESSON: Luke 15:1-10
September 11, 2022

“Finding the Lost”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The invention of GPS has completely calmed my nerves when it comes to getting lost. No longer do I have to struggle with a map that ends just where I happen to be. No more stopping at strange gas stations asking indifferent clerks for directions. I make a wrong turn. I get hopelessly lost, and I go to Google maps. Except of course when the weather is bad and it doesn't work. Then I call Vicki who goes on her computer and patiently talks me back to where I need to be.

Being lost can be scary. Going to a new school, you can get lost. Going to a new city or town, you can get lost. But we can also lose our way in life spiritually. We can take one step away from God, and then another, and then another, until suddenly we realize that we no longer know who we are or where we are anymore, and there's no roadmap back, no GPS. We need someone we can call. We need the personal touch to help us. We need a flesh and blood human being.

In our story today once more Jesus has managed to seriously annoy all of the fine and upstanding citizens in the community. He **welcomes** sinners. He welcomes the LOST. He doesn't just tolerate them. This isn't a formal limited acceptance based on certain pre-conditions being met. This is an EMBRACE. Jesus clearly wanted to restore sinners to God. He sought out the lost, the disgraced, those rejected by society. Jesus welcomed the people who had made a total mess of their lives. And he didn't lecture them or tell them how bad they were. Not once do we see Jesus scolding broken people. Scolding arrogant Pharisees, yes! But the ones society thinks deserve a good telling off, no. Instead, Jesus ate dinner with them, the ultimate expression of acceptance in this culture.

Now we know, theologically speaking, that we are all sinners. But in day-to-day life we don't act like that. In life we think about good people and bad people, people we'd like to invite over to dinner and people we wouldn't want within 50 feet of us. Despite the fact that so much of what we see is just window dressing, we judge on the basis of superficial things. Beneath the surface of that respectable looking professional could be true evil, and the homeless person who smells terrible could have a heart of gold. But moral judgements are even harder to shake in our world than appearances. There are some things that stick to a person for life. A woman who has been a prostitute will likely never be able to live that stigma down. It will always be whispered. The public humiliation inflicted on Monica Lewinsky was so great she had to

leave the country in order to find any kind of peace. Anyone who has been in prison faces an uphill battle. An alcoholic, drug addict or compulsive gambler may enter recovery, but there are some who will never believe they have changed and never want to have anything to do with them again. These are the people who we judge as beyond redemption, unclean, damaged and forever untrustworthy. The same was true in Jesus' day. It never once occurred to the Pharisees to reach out to the people Jesus spoke to. They were already condemned, separated off from all the "good" people and set adrift.

Jesus distinguishes between "the righteous," which in this case just means the people who sin politely, and "sinners," because it is the sinners who have become outcasts. And to make his point of just how precious these lost sinners are to God, he then goes on to tell two completely ridiculous stories. And the way he tells it, it's as if what he's suggesting is perfectly normal! He starts out by asking, "*Which of you men who having a hundred sheep would not abandon the 99 in the wilderness to go look for one that was lost?*" The answer to that question, in point of fact, would be zero. One lost sheep could just stay lost if it meant risking the 99. A business can survive a 1% loss. It can't survive a 99% loss. But Jesus acts like looking for the lost sheep is assumed! Of course, it's not assumed. People have tried to come up with various rationalizations for this story. Maybe there were several other shepherds. Maybe the dangerous place the flock was left wasn't really that dangerous. But the word we have in Greek means the desert or wilderness. It means a dangerous place, a place a flock should never be left alone and unsupervised. Jesus deliberately told the story this way to jar his audience. And he goes on to say that when he finds the lost sheep this fictional shepherd doesn't take it back to the flock—he carries it home and asks everyone else to celebrate with him! He wants to have a party because he has found his precious lost sheep.

The second parable is about a woman. Her loss is one-tenth of what she owns. A Greek drachma is about a day's wages, and this woman had ten of them. It could have been her dowry. So she does what we all do when we've lost something small but valuable. She turns up the light and goes systematically through the room piece by piece. I found a contact lens in a pile of hay that way once. Unfortunately, I had already stepped on it. This woman was methodical, and when she found the coin she rejoiced. That we understand. But Jesus says that like the shepherd, she was so happy she wanted to have a party. She called everyone together to celebrate! She would have spent the lost coin feeding everyone, and what's the point of that, we ask? No one does this. But this is the kind of extravagant joy God feels when a person who was lost, is found.

We always tell our children to avoid bad company, don't we? And we don't garden in white gloves because the gloves will get dirty, not because the dirt will get "glovey". But Jesus wasn't in any danger of being led astray. He wasn't going to start going to brothels and getting drunk. He wasn't going to start lying and cheating and stealing. The influence was all going one way. And the people who came to listen to Jesus who were considered irredeemable "sinners" by their peers came because they heard something new. They heard acceptance and forgiveness and a fresh start. They heard truly good news.

Without being conscious of it we think of God's attitude towards us according to human standards, and human standards have limits. I would lose patience with me! Even the most loving and patient people reach their limit. Jesus says to forgive seventy times seven and we're like, "Ah, that would be no." Jesus charges us with the task of loving broken people into wholeness. And sometimes we just walk away. *"That other person is just impossible!"* we say. It's not happening. I give up. But God doesn't love like that. God is incredibly patient. The shepherd looking for the lost sheep and the woman looking for the lost coin are both images of God. God is relentless. God goes out of the way. God searches carefully. God leaves no stone unturned. This is how much God wants those who are lost to be back in God's arms. But the lie we hear in our minds is of a God who gives up on us and others. We picture God saying, "She's having doubts again. She doesn't even know what she believes. I'm done with her! He told a lie to his boss again. How many times do we go through this? It's over. I'm finished with him." Mercifully God's love and persistence is greater than any human being.

The religious establishment of Jesus' day thought that the people he welcomed were lost causes. They were NOT Godly and they were definitely NOT welcome. They would just mess up the righteous with their dark influence. But exclusion and rejection was never God's intent, and the Church is not a country club for the righteous. We are a rescue station for the lost. Each one of us in our own way has been among the lost, and we have been found. And our calling in Christ is to open the door wide for all to come in. We are here to welcome people home. In Christ the past truly is washed away and we are all made new. Not only does God accept the lost, God rejoices when they come home. Amen.

Ezekiel 34: 11-16

¹¹ "For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹² As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. ¹⁴ I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. ¹⁶ I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

Luke 15:1-10

¹⁵ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

⁸ “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”