

“Between Lost & Found”

Luke 15:1-7

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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The religious leaders of Jesus’ day found him perplexing. He had been raised in a Jewish household and taught at the feet of the rabbis in the Jerusalem temple. He had been a disciple of John the Baptist before heading out on his own to proclaim the coming realm of God. But he just didn’t behave the way those scribes and Pharisees thought he should. In particular, he was hanging out with the wrong sorts of people – folks our text calls sinners and tax collectors.

“Sinners” here is probably a catch-all category for folks who weren’t observant Jews. As we know all too well, religious folks can be quick to think of those who are not religious, or who are religious in a different way, as “sinners”. And “tax collectors” – well, we can imagine why the folks who collected taxes were unpopular, particularly because they were collecting that money on behalf of Rome. They were collaborators with the powerful empire. Despite their “outsider” status in the religious community – or perhaps *because* of it – sinners and tax collectors were attracted to Jesus’ teaching. They were coming near to listen to him. And the religious leaders were not at all happy. *This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them*, they complained.

And, really, can you blame them? It’s one thing to be kind to people – all of them – when you encounter them on the street or at the grocery store, but it’s another thing entirely to sit down for table fellowship with them. Eating with others was in Jesus’ time, and still is, a sign of friendship, of camaraderie. Sharing a meal around the table involves conversation, sharing ideas, sharing lives, and we tend to be pretty particular about who we invite to dinner. We don’t usually sit at table with just anyone. But Jesus did. And the scribes and Pharisees were scandalized. (Perhaps we would be too, if Jesus were to show up at the White House mess hall for lunch with modern day sinners and White Christian Nationalist collaborators.)

In response to all this grumbling, Jesus told this parable: There was a shepherd who had a hundred sheep, but one of them went missing. So he left the ninety-nine to fend for themselves in the wilderness while he went looking for the one that was lost. When he found it, he put it on his shoulders to carry it back to the others, recognizing, perhaps, that it was worn out by its lonely venture. And when the shepherd got home, he threw a party to celebrate the return of the lost sheep.

There isn’t a lot of detail here, is there? Parables get us thinking, but they don’t answer all our questions. We don’t know, for example, why that sheep went missing. Was it daydreaming when the others moved to a new grazing field? Was it weak and unable to keep up with the rest? Was it rejected and outcast by the ninety-nine? We don’t know. There are many ways in which it might have gotten lost. Whatever had happened, the shepherd wasn’t willing to leave it behind. He left the rest of the flock unattended in the wilderness, and searched until he found it. And it’s not too hard to imagine that when he got back to the flock, another one or two had also gone missing.

Herding sheep is a never-ending task. While the shepherd is off searching for one sheep, another is likely to wander off.

You've probably heard it said that people can be a lot like sheep. That's certainly true when it comes to getting lost like the sheep in our story. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way.* All of us, Isaiah said. So if you heard this parable and thought that Jesus was simply comparing sinners and tax collectors to lost sheep, think again. In fact, since it was the sinners and tax collectors who had found Jesus, we might argue that it was actually the scribes and Pharisees who were lost in their emphasis on rule keeping and outwardly righteous living. Maybe the folks who gathered at Jesus feet to listen to him weren't lost at all. Maybe it was the righteous folks who were lost.

Or maybe that distinction doesn't even matter, because whoever we are – sinner, tax collector, scribe, or Pharisee – all of us know what it is to get lost. Our GPS gets us where we want to go most of the time, as long as we have entered a destination that has a discrete address and our system is up to date. But sometimes it says “turn right” when there is no road in sight, and we have no idea where we are or what to do. And if getting lost in our car is a challenge, getting lost spiritually poses even more of a dilemma.

There is an ebb and flow to our spiritual lives. We live between being lost and knowing where we are.

- We get lost in fear and anger when we see injustice and oppression and war raging around the world, but we also speak up and vote and embrace our work in the world.
- We get lost trying to fit into the culture in which we live, but we also give thanks for movements and people in our time that protect those on the margins.
- We get lost overbooking our kids, but we also bring them to church and encourage them as they develop values for a lifetime.
- We get lost doing jobs we hate because the money is good, but we also give thanks for an income that allows us to procure the necessities of life and to give to those in need.
- We get lost in retirement when we feel as though we have no purpose, but we also are thankful that we have lived long enough to rest from our labors.
- We can even get lost in the rules and rites and rituals designed to encourage our faith, even as our souls are fed by them.

When we feel lost, we may be able to identify the cause, but other times we simply feel unmoored – confused, disoriented, bewildered, and lonely.

And then the shepherd shows up, looking for us wherever we have roamed, absolutely committed to finding us and to restoring that which has been lost in us: our voice, our anger, our freedom, our joy, our peace. The shepherd offers us repentance (the Greek word is *metanoia*): not just regret or shame, but the gift of a changed mind – a new perspective – a transformed way to perceive and respond to life. Not just remorse, but reversal – movement from brokenness to wholeness and restoration. That

is what the Spirit of God can do. That is what the community of faith can do. That is what love can do.

The parable ends with the shepherd inviting friends and neighbors to a party. "Rejoice with me," he says, "for I have found my lost sheep." If you've ever lost something of value and then found it, and I would guess that we all have, then you can understand the shepherd's joy. But it was not just the shepherd who rejoiced. His friends and neighbors joined him. What a beautiful image this is of the beloved community, rejoicing together as the lost places in us are made whole. Every time we gather for Communion at the Lord's Table, we reenact that celebration. There are no fences around this table. All are welcome to eat and drink and rejoice, for we all are lost and we all are found.

Let the church say, Amen.