

Gospel – Luke 15: 1-10

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon: 9-15-19

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Back in the summer of 1974, when I'd just turned thirteen, I attended my first major league baseball game at Angel Stadium in Anaheim not too far from our home. My mom, my stepdad, and I met up with another couple and their eight-year-old daughter, whom I often babysat.

I can't tell you who the Angels were playing that night, or if Nolan Ryan pitched one of his no-hitters, but I can tell you that even as a Southern California kid who'd been to Disneyland at least a dozen times, I'd never seen so many people in one place at one time. Stadium capacity at the time was 43,000, and I have no idea how many people were in the stands, only that when the game was over, we all poured out of the bleachers heading down corridors elbow-to-elbow swarming toward the exit as if we were a school of tightly packed grunion headed toward the beach.

I shuffled out behind my parents' friends and their daughter, trying not to step on her small tennis-shoed feet. I remember chatting, but not about what, as we wound our way past closed concession stands and through the concourse. As we converged with another river of people approaching the exit, I realized I ought to be with my parents, not with their friends, since we were going home, and not to their house.

I stopped walking, turned around, and was engulfed by a crowd of people streaming past me, none of whom were my parents. I scanned the faces coming toward me for a few seconds, and when I still didn't see my mom and stepdad, I turned back around to resume walking with their friends—but they were gone. I stumbled into the crowd looking in vain for a familiar face as everyone pressed on toward the exit, taking me along with them.

As I got closer to the wall of doors, I fully expected to see my parents and their friends standing just inside or outside the doors, waiting for me to join them. But they weren't. Since I was a kid, used to reading in the backseat on car rides and usually oblivious to directions, I had no idea where my stepdad had parked his car or how I'd ever be able to find it and my parents.

Panic and tears both began to rise as I realized I was truly lost. I guess my distress must've showed because soon a woman was standing in front of me asking if everything was okay. I told her I'd lost my parents.

Not far away, she spotted a man in an official jacket—an usher or a security guard; I don't remember which now—ushered me toward him and told him my predicament.

She left when he took over, asking me to wait against a wall while he spoke into his walkie-talkie. Soon someone else in a uniform jacket appeared with a walkie-talkie clipped to his belt and I followed him through a door, down a flight of stairs to an underground level, and from there, down a long windowless corridor. He stopped and opened a door revealing half a dozen little kids, all lost like me, kept watch over by yet another uniformed adult.

The person on watch explained that there were too many people outside right then to go looking for our parents. We would wait until the stadium emptied out and then they'd take us to find our parents. So, I sat on a bench, like the other kids and waited in silence, trying not to cry.

Though I was relieved to be safe, I was also embarrassed. In any other circumstance, I'd be babysitting these kids, reading them bedtime stories and tucking them in and watching TV in their living rooms until their parents came home from the ballgame. I was at least twice their age, and almost five feet tall. I could see faces in the crowd when I'd been looking for my parents. These kids were probably staring at belts and waistbands; no wonder they'd gotten separated from their parents.

What excuse did I have? None. I should've known better than to get lost. I felt stupid, thoroughly humiliated, and convinced my error was going to put me in so much trouble once I was finally reunited with my parents.

The minutes dragged on until finally our supervisor opened the door and ushered us onto a waiting motorized cart with bench seats. The driver cruised through the building and out toward the parking lot, which ringed the entire arena.

He told us not to worry, that he'd approach each lingering vehicle, and eventually we'd all find our parents. "Believe me," he said, "they're waiting for you."

As we turned into the first parking area, there were still dozens of cars in the lot, many more cars than lost children, but I could see that some vehicles had their emergency flashers on, headlights blinking in the dark summer night, beckoning us.

I don't remember where I was in the lineup of reunification, but I do remember the driver commenting on how helpful the flashing headlights were when he pulled up next to my stepdad's car. The driver said parents didn't usually think to do that, and my stepdad responded that he'd circled the entire parking lot looking for me, and as he stopped to talk to other parents of lost kids, he'd told each of them to turn on their flashers.

As the driver and my stepdad thanked each other, I stepped down from the electric cart and into my mother's warm embrace. Then, as the cart continued on its mission, I climbed into the backseat, waiting for the dreaded reprimand, surprised that it never came.

All these years later, I'm still anxious about being separated in large crowds. Every time I leave an arena, my experience at Angel Stadium surfaces, and I hold tight to the hand of whoever I'm with, afraid I'll get lost again.

Encountering this scripture passage brought the incident and my anxiety to the foreground of my thoughts. And for that, I find myself unexpectedly grateful.

The process of immersing myself in Luke's words allowed me to see the situation from other perspectives, not only as the sheep or coin or young teenager who was lost, but as the shepherd and the woman who cleaned her house, and the kind woman, security team, and stepdad who all helped in the search to find that which was lost.

It's likely that you, like me, have been lost in a situation that still sticks with you many years later. Maybe it happened while visiting a new place, or driving with bad directions, or out on a hike. Or maybe it was less of a geographical situation and more of an emotional one—feeling lost and unmoored after an unexpected move, or unsure of what comes next after the children left home, or after the death of a loved one.

Whatever the particulars, each of us in our own lives and in our own ways has been lost—to ourselves, or to those we love, or to our faith in God. And perhaps you, like me, have approached being lost with judgment about yourself, with feelings of failure or inadequacy that lingered long after you were found or found yourself.

Reading Jesus' parables about the lost sheep and lost coin, and applying them to my own life, I find good news for those of us who are lost:

First: There are people looking for us, even when we don't about it and can't see them. The shepherd leaves his flock—hopefully in a safe place—to search for the lost one. The woman tears her house apart, cleaning from top to bottom to find the coin. I don't know when my parents realized I wasn't with them, and even though they weren't where I hoped or expected them to be, they were out looking for me, sending out SOS signals with flashing headlights, even helping others to find their lost children.

Second: Things and people get lost. Getting lost isn't an intellectual, moral, or spiritual failure. It's reality, and when people see that reality, they respond. The shepherd retraces the paths he's led the sheep on, the woman sweeps and looks in every place her coins could possibly be, strangers see lost children and young teens and offer help, the baseball stadium staff have protocols to reunite lost children with parents, parents turn on flashing beacons.

None of them just sit there saying, "Oh well, it's lost," or, "Oh, well, she's lost. There's nothing we can do about it," or "It's her own fault she got lost, let her find herself by herself," or "Oh well, I didn't need that sheep, or coin, or kid anyway," or "Oh well, I'll get a new sheep, a new coin, a new child."

When we who are lost feel powerless to change our circumstances, there are people and forces greater than ourselves working on our behalf. Help is available in our distress, even if we don't know how to ask for it, and even if we don't recognize our need.

And perhaps most importantly, especially for those of us who are prone to punishing ourselves for making mistakes: Joy is the proper response once we're found, no matter what circumstances led to our being lost.

The shepherd didn't banish the wayward sheep for wandering away.

The woman didn't give away all her coins; she didn't decide that in losing one coin she was too careless to be responsible for any coins.

The stranger who asked if I was okay didn't say that it was ridiculous for a teen to get lost in the crowd.

The security staff didn't lecture us kids to be more careful or responsible while they waited to return us to our parents.

My parents didn't shame or scold or punish me once I was found. They shared some responsibility, wishing they'd been more attentive and hadn't lost track of me. But they didn't wallow in self-recrimination and decide we could never go anywhere again because we might get separated.

The shepherd, the woman with her coins, my parents: all were happy to have that which was lost restored to them. Each celebrated.

In the gospel, the shepherd and the woman invited their friends and neighbors and threw a party. My parents hugged me. I'd like to say that we went out for ice cream with their friends who'd waited to see that I was returned safely; but I don't remember if the friends stayed or what happened next.

What I do know is that in our finding, we are recipients of grace, of unconditional love, of welcome and celebration. A point that Jesus makes abundantly clear to those who are judging him about the company he keeps.

He reminds the righteous that the welfare of each person, whether we "approve" of them or not, is important to all of us. And he asks us to consider the impact in our own lives when we have lost something or someone important to us.

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them," Jesus says. He doesn't ask us to suppose we are the sheep or the coin, but that's often our first instinct.

What is our modern day sheep? A missing pet? A family member struggling with addiction? A friend suffering from depression? A child caught in a custody battle between acrimonious parents? A fellow parishioner who has stopped coming to worship?

What is our modern day coin? A wedding ring? A family heirloom? A vehicle registration?

Who are our modern day sinners and tax collectors? Telemarketers? Internet scammers? Sex Workers? Drug dealers? People in the political party we're not?

Whatever form the sheep or coin takes for us, whoever the sinners and tax collectors are, Jesus calls us to seek that which has been lost to us, to include those who have been excluded—and further calls us to rejoice at the reunification.

Celebration sounds wonderful, but can be so difficult when what or who we've lost has hurt us.

Words that wound our pride. Spouses who break our hearts. Addictions that poison relationships. Bosses who fire us. Churches that drill in sinfulness to the exclusion of grace. And Sons who beg for their inheritance early and run away to squander it—as happens in the next verses of Luke's gospel.

It's difficult when these lost things are restored to believe that they'll remain found.

It's hard to welcome them wholeheartedly and take the risk of losing them again and being hurt again and not having life work out the way we want. It seems safer to be wary, to require assurances through scripted behaviors, specific beliefs, court orders, drug tests, or some other external proof that the restoration is real, that promises will be kept, that things will be different this time around.

But if God doesn't require us to swear oaths and sign promises in order to welcome us into relationship, if God doesn't need anything more than us as we are to celebrate our belonging and love us unconditionally, then our rules about belonging simply don't hold up.

Most of those who judged Jesus genuinely believed their reasons for exclusion were justified. His ideas were so radical, his words and actions threatened their religious practices and their very identities.

For us, Jesus words may be simple to embrace, but living them out is much more difficult.

Be like the shepherd who seeks the lost sheep until it's found.

Be like the woman who cleans her house until she recovers her lost coin.

Be like the father welcomes the prodigal son with no questions asked.

Be generous; Be merciful.

May Jesus' words open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts.

May his words remind us that to be human is to be lost
to be human is to be found, to be human is to seek,
to be human is to find

to be human is to forgive others and ourselves,
to be human is to celebrate inclusion
to be human is to live and love in the manner of the one who gave his life in love for us.

