

<sup>1</sup> Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” <sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <sup>6</sup> And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.’ <sup>7</sup> Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. <sup>8</sup> “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ <sup>10</sup> Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he considered me faithful and appointed me to his service, <sup>13</sup> even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, <sup>14</sup> and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. <sup>16</sup> But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience as an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. <sup>17</sup> To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Luke 15:1-10 and I Timothy 1:12-17

09/14/2025 – Saginaw First United Methodist Church

“Lost and Found”

Rev. Amy Terhune

With GPS on my phone, I don’t get lost anymore. At least, that’s what I tell myself. But several years back, some of you will remember that I took a group of adults on a mission trip to Houston, Texas after Hurricane Harvey wrecked devastation down there. One evening, we were headed to dinner, and a member of the group who had lived in that area wanted to take us to a particular restaurant that she claimed was to die for. The address was plugged into the GPS on my phone and off we went. Pretty soon, and much to our shock, we found ourselves at the Houston International Airport, which is the last place I wanted to be. We drove around the road that skirted the airport looking for the restaurant. My poor GPS kept telling me it was recalibrating...recalibrating...recalibrating.... After the fourth or fifth time around the stinking airport, someone had the brains to use the phone to call the restaurant before I destroyed my phone and the annoying electronic woman in my GPS that kept recalibrating, only to learn that the restaurant was inside the airport, just past the security checkpoint. Strike one. So we put in a second address to another location of the same restaurant, and when that was closed for remodeling, we wound up eating at 9:00 at night at some little outdoor dive in the middle of nowhere. GPS is only as functional as the human being who operates it. Pro tip: If you go on mission trip with me, somebody else should operate the GPS. You’ve been advised.

So I don't get lost anymore. Except on the inside. This has been a week, hasn't it? I feel a little out of my element, I'll admit. I'm not sure what to say, or how to put what I feel in words. Between remembering September 11, which is a rough day for a lot of us, I think, and the assassination of Charlie Kirk and school shootings and train stabbings and talk of a government shutdown, not to mention Charge Conference paperwork and people I care about facing medical difficulties, and planning for stewardship and Christmas and book studies and kids programs... I'm feeling stretched a little thin, if I'm honest. I tell myself I don't get lost anymore. After all, I've got the theological expertise and the spiritual tools to handle whatever comes my way. I've lived through rough weeks and difficult seasons before, and God has always carried me. It's a typical fall. I don't wander. I pay attention. I stick with the herd. And I don't get lost anymore.

But I do.

Do you want to know when I really get lost? It's when I convince myself that I don't get lost anymore. I know that's sounds crazy, but hear me out and listen again to what Jesus says: Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99...where? IN THE WILDERNESS! A much beloved gospel hymn goes like this: "There were ninety and nine who safely lay in the shelter of the fold..." Which is lovely. But that's not how Jesus tells it. He says the other 99 have been left in the wilderness. Can any of you think of any time in scripture when anyone successfully navigated their way through the wilderness without God's help? I can't. Moses and the people wandered for 40 years in the wilderness. David and Elijah both hid out there. Jesus was tempted there, for heaven's sake! And the prophet Isaiah tells us that when the Kingdom of God finally comes, God will make a path in the wilderness, because there isn't one there right now. No landmarks! The wilderness is a frightening, scary, dangerous place. The wilderness is not where we want to be. If we're in the wilderness, and God has gone off in search of the one that's "lost", then we're lost. And that's the point. Be we the one or the 99, we're lost! All 100 of us are utterly dependent upon the wisdom and guidance of God, the Good Shepherd!

Now, all of this begs an obvious question. If all of us are lost, how do we get 'unlost'? How do we stay 'unlost'? I have a couple of theories, but let's look first, at the context in which Jesus is telling this parable. As usual, Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners, and the scribes and the Pharisees are grumbling about that. There's nothing new about that. They're always criticizing Jesus for his unholy contact with the impure and ungodly. And so Jesus tells them this parable about how much God loves the lost and the wayward—how precious they are—how He's ready to celebrate when their hearts return to Him. John G. Lynn says this about the Pharisees and this parable:

"Jesus, going after them, did not leave the 99 in the sheepfold where the wolf could not enter in. Nor did he secure them in a rich pasture. He abandoned them in the wilderness where wolves ran wild and no grass grew. Jesus knew from experience that no one finds nourishment or protection in the desert unless it comes from God. The 99 had something to learn... Secure in the sheepfold of their own good works, [the Scribes and Pharisees] measured grace, ounce by ounce, as their reward for what they had accomplished. Their own study of the law refreshed them by day and gave them fire by night. To God they murmured, "No thank you, Lord, we'll make our own light in the darkness and our own rainfall when we feel dry. And we will drive from the sheepfold any lambs who feel differently about you." So God abandoned them. He left them to themselves and went after the lamb who longed for God to be his light by night, his rainfall by day. Running after his rejected sheep, God left behind the 99 in the desert...so they, too, could feel how much they really needed God in their lives. No one controls God. No one is that self-sufficient." [from "The Other Ninety-Nine" by John G. Lynn, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

That's a scathing critique. God forbid that we in the church get ourselves in that mindset—"We're not lost", "we're doing things right", "we're just fine." As soon as we start thinking that way, we're lost. We're abandoned in the wilderness. Let's push that thought just a bit further as we think about staying

‘unlost’. I said earlier that there are no landmarks in the wilderness. Save one. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. The Good Shepherd is our landmark. If we keep our eyes on Him, we don’t get lost, right? Follow that out to its logical conclusion. The only way to stay ‘unlost’ is to follow God as He goes out searching for the lost. And is that not the mission Jesus charged us with: ‘Go, therefore, into all the world to make disciples...and I will be with you.’

These parables in Luke 15 teach us that God is committed to finding the lost. That’s a core value; a defining characteristic; a higher purpose. How we do that must change with the changing needs of the culture, and we can always do it better. But why we do it does not—because each of us is a precious and beloved child of God. That’s another core value. It doesn’t matter what chemicals we’ve put into our bodies, or who has been in our beds, or what we’ve done or how far we’ve strayed, we are His children, and He will NOT STOP LOOKING for any of us.

Years ago, Caryl Houselander wrote some beautiful but challenging words in the book, *The Reed of God*: "If ever you have loved anyone very deeply, and then lost them through separation, estrangement, or even by death, you will know that there is an instinct to look for them in every crowd. The human heart is not reasonable; it will go on seeking for those whom it loves even when they are dead. It will miss a beat when someone passes by who bears them the least resemblance; a tilt of the hat, an uneven walk, a note in the voice." [Cited in John Andrew, *Nothing Cheap* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), p. 41. As used in "The God of Lost Sheep" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Some of you know what she is talking about. That’s what love does. God is no different. Even when we are dead in our sins, so great is His love that He can’t stop straining His neck to see if we might be in the crowd. All of us are lost. All of us are loved. God loves the lost.

So how do we get and stay ‘unlost’? I go back to where we started this morning—by acknowledging that we are lost, and that we are every bit as sinful and every bit as needy as that needy sinner over there. Even the apostle Paul, who can reasonably be credited with advancing Christ’s name further than any other single follower, never stopped talking about his own ‘lostness.’ But for some of us, that’s an extremely uncomfortable exercise. Sometimes, we take the attitude that we’re doing the best we can, we’re improving, we’re growing, we’re looking at the bright side and trying to see the best in others. Why would God want us to be so down on ourselves, to see our faults, our weaknesses, our failures, our ineptitude, our sinfulness. How can that accomplish anything?

It’s a legitimate question, and I can only respond that the answer lies in the example of Christ, who lived among us, touched us, felt what we felt, suffered what we suffered, laughed and cried alongside of us. He felt and experienced our ‘lostness’ so that when we came before God to talk about how our parents are ailing or our kids are in trouble or our health is failing or our marriage is hanging by a thread or our job is killing us or our friends have betrayed us or our finances are a mess or our world is going up in flames, God could say, “Yeah, I get it.” It’s about connecting with one another. It’s about recognizing that you and I are not self-sufficient unto ourselves. It’s about realizing the need for grace and extending it to the least, the left-out, the lost, because we identify ourselves as among them. Not all lostness is sin. We should be clear about that. Sometimes it’s pain, disillusionment, or despair. But regardless, only when we can face our ‘lostness’ can we appreciate how deeply we are loved. And only then can we learn to love those that God loves—to share God’s desperate search for those who are still lost and who have not yet learned to focus their sight on the Good Shepherd as we wander through the wilderness of life. And only then does the effervescent joy of God fill us to the point where we too can celebrate the one who is found and not fear them because they’re different.

In *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, R. Alan Culpepper concludes his commentary on these parables with these words: In both parables, rejoicing calls for celebration, and the note of celebration may be exaggerated to emphasize the point. Neither sheep nor coins can repent, but the parable aims not at

calling the "sinners" to repentance but at calling the "righteous" to join the celebration. Whether one will join the celebration is all-important because it reveals whether one's relationships are based on merit or mercy. Those who find God's mercy offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents. Thus they exclude themselves from God's grace. (page 298) Thus, they are lost.

Let me close by telling you about a woman, we'll call her Terri, who took her two small children and fled an abusive marriage. She moved into an apartment and started a new life for herself. But one day, Terri came home to find that her key no longer worked in her apartment door. She broke a window pane and got in, only to discover that all her possessions were gone. Everything. The police showed up shortly, but rather than pursuing the criminal who stole all her stuff, they started to arrest Terri for breaking and entering. It seems that Terri's roommate had taken Terri's rent money, but never paid the rent with it. Terri's roommate had been evicted that day by the landlord, and when she moved out, she took all of Terri's stuff with her. Terri was in shock. She and her two daughters were now homeless. They had lost everything they ever owned. Terri took the little cash she had and bought them dinner. Then she drove to the park to spend the night. As the girls fell asleep, Terri noticed other people drifting into the park. They were homeless, dirty, down and out. Not the kind of people with whom Terri would ever associate.

The next morning, Terri tried to reach her boss to ask for an advance on that week's paycheck. As she fiddled with the phone, a dirty, unshaven "bum" walked up. He was one of the homeless she had eyed with suspicion. Hesitantly, he said, "Ma'am, please excuse the intrusion, but... well... I couldn't help but overhear the situation you are in, and well... me and the fella's took up a collection for you and your little girls. It's not very much, but maybe it'll help a little."

And he pressed a small wad of cash into her hand. Terri began to cry as she realized that these men, whom she had discounted, were showing her a love she was not capable of. Terri returned the money with a big hug and a changed heart. Later that day, when Terri's boss gave her an advance, she bought a bunch of groceries and drove to the park. She and her daughters laid out a feast for the homeless men. They spent the afternoon talking, laughing, and sharing their stories.

As Terri later said, "As long as I live, I will never forget that day, when God showed me what true generosity and giving meant. When he showed me love comes from the most unexpected places, in the most unlikely way. The world called them 'losers' but they are not lost. I was the lost one, and I almost lost the chance to experience God's grace and providence. Those old men will live in my heart and memories forever, as the richest people I ever knew, because they had enough love to share with a mother and her two daughters who would have never given them the time of day." [This was sent to us by a friend who took it from the Internet. The source is unknown. It was attributed to "Terri B." Adapted from "Why The British Coast Guard Doesn't Like Eric, But God Does" by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

All of us are lost. That's the human condition. Thankfully, God loves the lost enough to come looking for us. Enough to leave the comforts of heaven and roam the earth calling to us. All of us are lost. All of us are loved. God loves the lost. Will we follow His lead? Do we love the lost enough to leave what's comfortable and go looking? Remember, there are kids who have been bullied and neglected, and sometimes those kids have a lot of issues but the ones that are hardest to love often need that love the most. There are neighbors who've been told to hide who they love and who they are in order to be safe. This is a place to be loved for who they truly are. There are friends waiting to be made who may not look the same, think the same, speak the same language, but they need a community. All of us are lost. All of us are loved. God loves the lost. And that, my friends, is good news! Thanks be to God. Amen.