

Fourteenth Sunday in Pentecost, September 14, 2025.

St. Michael's Church

The Rev. Joshua Wong

Gospel reading: Luke 15: 1-10

*Focus: We are the lost lambs and need repentance.*

*Function: I am preaching this sermon to my parishioners to say, we are all sinners who are lost and need God's grace to enlighten us to see again.*

*Let us pray:*

*Gracious God, we ask that each day, you will enlighten what is dark in us, strengthen what is weak in us, mend what is broken in us, and revive your peace and love that has died within us. Amen.*

How does it feel when you find something that you thought was lost?

I recently lost a receipt that would have determined if I could return two items to the store. When I found the receipt, there was a sense of relief, a sense of joy because I can now accomplish my task and get my refund.

Today, Jesus gives us two parables. A parable is a simple story that highlights an instructive lesson or principle that Jesus is trying to make.

Both of these parables are about someone who has lost something of great value to them. For the shepherd, he cares about each one of his lambs. For the woman,

losing one coin was worth a days wage, and although she had 9 others, this would be a significant loss for her. In both of these parables, the story ends with celebrating with others over what was found. Jesus says “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

There are a few lines from John Newton’s famous hymn, “Amazing Grace” that speaks about being lost. “I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind but now I see.” Like many of us, I learned this hymn when I was a child, and I still find its words moving and beautiful. But the older I get, the more I wonder if being found is that simple: I’m not convinced anymore that I can fit my faith into its neat before-and-after story. There is a misunderstanding among Christians, that once we acknowledge Christ as Lord of our lives, we have found everything, and we will never feel lost in our faith anymore. I would even say that in some Protestant denominations, admitting to be lost is a sign of weakness, a sign that we don’t have enough faith. But I’m here to tell you that in the Episcopal denomination, we believe that a Christian journey is filled with moments of “lost and found.” The truth is, my lostness isn’t over. Lostness remains a central feature of my relationship with God, and if this week’s Gospel reading has anything to say about it, this is exactly as it should be.

As Luke sets the scene, Jesus is in trouble once again for hanging out with the wrong crowd. As “all the tax collectors and sinners” come near to listen to him, the Pharisees and scribes begin to grumble: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

In response, Jesus tells the scandalized religious insiders these two parables. In the first, a shepherd leaves his flock of ninety-nine to look for a single lamb that is lost. He searches until he finds it, and when he does, he carries that one lamb home on his shoulders, invites his friends and neighbors over, and throws a party to celebrate. Notice here that when the shepherd finds the sheep, the emphasis is in joy, not punishment.

In the second parable, a woman loses one of her ten silver coins. Immediately, she lights a lamp and sweeps her entire house, looking carefully for the coin until she finds it. Her activity of lighting a lamp and sweeping the floor indicates a typical poor home in Palestine with only one door and no windows. When she finds the coin, just like the shepherd, she calls together her friends and neighbors and asks them to celebrate the recovery of the coin: “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”

The first thing that strikes me about these parables is how many years I spent misreading them. For a long time, I thought that the lost lamb and the lost coin represented sinners “out there,” those outside our church walls who are not believers. But no. The lost lamb in the first parable belongs to the shepherd’s flock, they are his lamb. Likewise, the coin in the second parable belongs to the woman before she loses it; the coin is one of her very own. In other words, these parables are not about lost outsiders finding salvation and becoming Christians.

These parables are about us, the insiders. The church-goers, the bread-and-wine consumers, the Bible readers. These are parables about lostness on the inside. It is about our First Reading and Psalms passage for today, how God’s people are foolish and have wandered away.

What does this mean? Well, it means that lostness isn’t an experience exclusive to non or not-yet Christians. Lostness happens to God’s people as well. It happens within the beloved community. It’s not that we cross over once and for all from a sinful lostness to a righteous foundness. We get lost over and over again, and God finds us over and over again. Lostness is not a blasphemous anomaly; it’s part and parcel of the life of faith.

But what does it mean to be lost? It can mean so many things. It means we lose our sense of belonging, we lose our capacity to trust, we lose our felt experience of

God's presence, we lose our will to persevere. Some of us get lost when illness descends on our lives and God's goodness starts to look not-so-good. Some of us get lost when death comes too soon and too suddenly for someone we love, and we experience a crisis of faith that leaves us reeling. Some of us get lost when our marriages die. Some of us get lost when our children break our hearts. Some of us get lost in the throes of addiction, or anxiety, or lust, or unforgiveness, or hatred, or bitterness.

What I find in these parables is not that I still get lost, but what they reveal about the nature of God. God is the searcher, the seeker, the determined finder for the lost, his beloved. It also reveals that God doesn't hang out where I assume he does. God isn't in the fold with the ninety-nine protected sheeps, the insiders. God isn't curled up on her safe and comfortable couch polishing the nine coins she's already sure of. Instead, God is where the lost things are. God is in the uncomfortable moments where lostness reigns in our daily life. God is in the darkness of the wilderness, God is in the remotest corners of the house, God is where the search is at its fiercest. Meaning: if I want to find God, I have to seek the lost. I have to get lost. I have to leave the safety of the inside and venture out. I have to recognize my own lostness, and consent to be found.

When I was growing up, I was always part of my father's church. As a pastor's child, you go to church where your father works. The parishioners were your family, your friends, I remember our family never had a separation between family and church. Dinners were talking about our friends in church. When I was in my 30's many major life events happened. I came out and I decided I needed to find my own life, which included where my faith can find rest. Those were very lonely years, those were years I felt lost and alone. No more contact with familiar church friends, when everyone was at church, I was alone on a Sunday morning. During family dinners, no one in my family ever asked how I was doing. During that period of my life, I was confronting my identity.

When I read the parables today, a recurring thought came to me. Why would a shepherd risk the lives of the 99 to find that one sheep. Wasn't the safety of the 99 more logical? Or why would the woman care about one coin when she has 9 others she can use? Where was the logic? The answer that came to me was that what was lost was incredibly precious to them. Being lost isn't easy. For one thing, it's so hard for me to believe in those moments that I'm worth looking for. But to Jesus, I am. That I'm not expendable. That I'm loved enough and desired enough to warrant a long, hard, diligent search from God. It's so hard to trust that God won't give up on me. That God does God's best work when I'm

utterly lost and unable to find myself. That God will feel so much joy at my recovery that he'll tell the whole world the good news, and throw us all a party.

But this is in fact the case. Jesus tells these parables to religious insiders who won't admit to their own lostness. He shares these stories with folks who can't reconcile their brand of piety with Jesus's bewildering claim that lostness has its virtues. In her book, *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor makes a strong case for these virtues. She argues that lostness makes us "stronger at the edges and softer at the center." Lostness teaches us about vulnerability. About empathy. About humility. About patience. Lostness shows us who we really are, and who God really is. Are there areas in our lives where we are unable to admit we need God's help to see again. "I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind but now I see." And this "seeing" doesn't end, lostness doesn't go away, but lostness leads us to new discoveries.

The 13th century Sufi mystic, Rumi, said, "What you seek is seeking you." This is true with God as well, and this is grace. But maybe it's even truer that what I can't or won't seek is still seeking me. God looks for us when our lostness is so convoluted and so profound, we can't even pretend to look for God. But even in that bleak and hopeless place, God finds us. This is amazing grace. And it is ours.

Here's the bottom line. It's ok when you feel lost, it's part of discovering God.

Know that Jesus is right there, and you are valuable to God. Apostle Paul reminds us in Romans, "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

During my difficult time of coming out and wondering where Christ is, I learned that seeking and praying honestly to God was vital, God can take our confusion and frustrations. He promises that he will never give up on finding you, even when you may feel you have no strength left in you, God is still seeking you. And heaven will rejoice over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

I once was lost and now am found, was blind but now I see. Amen.