

Sermon for the 14th Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 15:1-10

“I once was lost but now am found. Was blind but now I see.” I can’t begin to count how many times I’ve sung these famous lines from John Newton’s “Amazing Grace.” I learned the hymn when I was a little girl, and I still find its assured language moving and beautiful. But here’s the thing: I’m not convinced anymore that I can fit my faith into its neat before-and-after story. Why? Because 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 St. Luke sets the scene, Jesus is in trouble once again for hanging out with the “wrong” people. 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 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.

In the second, 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. Then, 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 the unchurched or the unbelieving. People “out there.” The atheists and the naysayers. The folks beyond the fold, beyond the home country I call Christianity.

But no. The lost lamb in the first parable belongs to the shepherd’s flock from the very beginning of the story — it is *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*.

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. It happens *within* the beloved community. It's not that we cross over once and for all from a sinful lostness to a righteous "found-ness." We get lost over and over again – and God finds us over and over again. Lostness is not a blasphemous aberration; it's part and parcel of the life of faith.

But what does it mean to be lost? I think it means many things. Think for a moment about the ways *you've* wandered without even realizing it. The ways you've lost your moorings and found yourself in strange, frightening lands with no markers to guide you home.

Sometimes, 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. We lose the capacity to discern right from wrong.

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 to a loved one without warning, and we experience a crisis of faith that leaves us reeling. Some of us get lost when our marriages fall apart. 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 apathy, or bitterness.

Some of us get lost very close to home – within the very walls of the church. We get lost when prayer turns to dust in our mouths. When the Scriptures we once loved lie dead on the page. When sitting in a pew on a Sunday morning makes our skin crawl. When even the most well-intentioned sermon sucks the oxygen out of our lungs. When the table of bread and wine that once nourished us now leaves us hungry, cranky, bewildered, or bored.

We get lost. We get so miserably lost that the shepherd has to wander through the craggy wilderness to find us. We get so wholly lost that the housewife has to light her lamp, pick up her broom, and sweep out every nook and cranny of her house to discover what's become of us.

For the record, these versions of lostness aren't trivial. Notice that the searching in these parables is not a show. The shepherd isn't just *pretending* to look for the lost sheep. The woman isn't just putting on an act with her lamp and broom. What's lost is *really, truly* lost — even though the seeker is God.

Can we pause for a moment and take in how astonishing this is? That God contends with genuine stakes when it comes to our lostness? According to Jesus, God experiences authentic, real-time loss in God's dealings with us. God searches, God persists, God lingers, and God plods. God wanders over hills and valleys looking for his lost lamb. God turns the house upside down looking for her lost coin. And when at last God finds what God is looking for, God cannot contain the joy that wells up inside. So God invites the whole neighborhood over, shares the happy news of recovery, and throws a party to end all parties.

I'll admit it — this is not how I generally picture God. I can't easily imagine God as a foolishly love-hungry shepherd, leaving the ninety-nine behind to crawl through bushes and clamber over ledges in search of the one. I can barely conceive of God as a housewife bent over her broom, poking into dusty, cobwebby corners, hoping to spot a silvery glimmer in the shadows. I struggle to conceive of God as one who seeks the small, the seemingly insignificant, the hard-to-find, the just plain difficult.

Maybe the most scandalous aspect of Jesus's lost and found parables is not that I still get lost. Maybe what's most scandalous is what the parables reveal about the nature of God. God the searcher, the seeker, the determined, dogged finder. If Jesus's parables are true, then God doesn't hang out where I assume God does.

If Jesus's parables are true, then God isn't in the fold with the ninety-nine insiders. God isn't curled up on her couch polishing the nine coins she's already sure of. *God is where the lost things are.* God is where lostness reigns. 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.

This isn't easy for most of us. It's hard. It's hard for us to believe that we're worth looking for. That we're not expendable. That we're loved enough and desired enough to warrant a long, hard, diligent search. It's hard to trust that God won't give up on us. That God does God's best work when we're utterly lost and unable to find ourselves. That God will feel so much joy at our recovery that God will 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 beautiful 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.

The 13th century Sufi mystic, Rumi, said, "What you seek is seeking you." This is true, 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.

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