

Sermon – Luke 15:1-10  
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“Get Lost!”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. In a recent issue of *The Christian Century*, Melissa Earley, a United Methodist pastor in Arlington Heights, tells the story of Amanda Eller. Earlier this year, Ms. Eller left her car to go hiking in a forest preserve on Maui. Planning on a short hike, Ms. Eller left her water bottle and phone in the car. After all, she wasn't planning on getting lost. But lost she got. On day three, she fell off a cliff and broke her leg. She later lost her shoes in a flood. Eventually, the official search-and-rescue mission was called off. But, Pastor Earley writes, “volunteers persisted. They searched ravines, caves, and pools. They climbed, rappelled, hiked, and dove. . . . The man coordinating the search was fired from his job for missing work. . . . On May 25, day 17 of Eller's ordeal, rescuers spotted her seven miles from the central search area. She was injured, dehydrated, and alive.” It's a true story but also a parabolic one, not so different from the two parables of lostness with which Luke 15 begins – a persistent team of volunteer searchers mirroring the shepherd and the woman in our passage.
2. There are few things quite so terrifying as being lost, knowing neither where you are nor how to get back to where you came from. The simple fact of the matter is that once you're good and lost there's not much you can do about it. Ms. Eller had little chance of finding her way out of that forest preserve. The sheep in the parable was in even worse shape; sheep, once lost, tend to just sit down where they are and bleat incessantly. And the coin is in the worst

shape of all. Once dropped and swept under the couch, it can do nothing but sit there and gather dust as it's joined by pet dander and goldfish crackers and other household detritus. We are perfectly good at getting ourselves lost, but when it comes to being found – truly found – there's little that we can do but wait for rescue. Yes, Jesus speaks of repentance in each parable, but it is repentance that follows being found. Sheep and coins are as good as dead, and there's nothing they can do about it.

3. Our lostness comes in many flavors, of course, even for those of us who do remember to bring our GPS devices when we go hiking. From vocational searches to health crises to relationship breakdowns, we find ourselves lost. And how often have we helped create systems and structures that sweep others under the dusty couches of the world only to be forgotten? But all of this lostness has the same root cause: we have willfully wandered away from the One who is meant to be both the beginning and destination of our story.
4. The reality of our willful wandering is heartbreakingly highlighted in Exodus 32. God has brought the people out of bondage and slavery in Egypt. God has parted the Red Sea and let it crash upon their pursuers. God has brought them to Mount Sinai to give them the Law, which contains everything they need to know to live in accordance with God's dreams and desires. They are on their way to the Promised Land. All they have to do – *like literally the only thing* – is remember that God is the One they should be following. So what do they do while Moses tarries on the mountain? They wander away into idolatry, thinking that they can create a better god than the God who saved them. Upon seeing the golden calf, God's righteous anger runs hot. Which, to be honest, is totally understandable. Yet with God, the last word is always grace. There will be consequences; the people will be punished. But not destroyed. God's promises remain.

5. As a Grace member insightfully asked during Cornerstones Bible study this week, what are the golden calves we worship, those things that draw us out of an exclusive relationship with the One true God and into idolatry? I found myself thinking how easy it is to think of the golden calves that others allow to displace the divine. Sports and money, pride and power. People who love this politician or that one, who just plain think the wrong way about important things. And then it dawned on me that *my* golden calf tends to be identifying the golden calves worshipped by others. Because pointing out how wrong they are feels so right, so good. Well, give me a moment while I remove the log from my own eye. I am no less in need of finding that you; you are no less in need of finding that anyone else. The Pharisees needed to be found as much as the tax collectors; maybe more so. In the end, Jesus – like the shepherd, like the woman – is going to go after every last one. Even if the coin is the least rare and valuable; even if the sheep is a stand in for that person you like the least. Why? The shepherd looks for the sheep because the sheep belongs to the shepherd. The woman looks for the coin because the coin belongs to the woman. And Jesus looks for you because you belong to Jesus.
  
6. Driving through the Scottish Highlands, you could be forgiven for thinking that there was a sheep-vandalizing epidemic unfolding. Everywhere you look, there are sheep wandering aimlessly with nary a fence to keep them where they're supposed to be. But what they are missing in direction, they make up for in decoration. Blotches of bright spray paint – red, orange, yellow, green – give color to their otherwise dull, off-white hue. At first, I couldn't figure out why. Was this how misguided Scottish youth spent their Friday nights, sneaking up on sheep and tagging them? Were there no cows to be tipped over? Of course, once the real reason was explained to me, I felt foolish for not realizing it. The sheep had not been vandalized by a stranger. Each had been marked by its owner, who knew that the sheep would wander.

And so the shepherd would let the sheep wander, knowing that, once marked, it could be found again.

7. You, my friends, have also been marked, for there is One to whom you belong. First with the *imago dei* and, when that got scuffed and faded, with the indelible cross of Christ painted upon you in baptism. To save you, to find you, to welcome you home, Christ the Good Shepherd became a sheep, the very Lamb of God. He gave himself up to die, lost in the wilderness, so that in his resurrection, those other sheep in the wilderness would finally be found and brought home. Like the volunteers searching for Ms. Eller, Jesus doesn't *need* to keep looking for us, but he keeps at it anyway. He refuses to stop until we're found. Not all of our searchings will bring success. Sometimes in this broker world the rescue party needs to be called back. But Jesus will not be thwarted, not even by death. You will be found, and you will live in him.
  
8. And note, finally, that each parable ends with a party, a celebration in which the newly found are truly welcome, even if they have been the worst kind of sinners and don't seem that interested in amending their ways. Which is exactly counter to the concern of the scribes and Pharisees. They only wanted the right kind of people at the party. Talk about missing the point! Never mind that there are no "right" people, no one who's good enough, no one whose GPS is going to guide them into the Kingdom. No, no one gets in except by getting lost and then found by Jesus. Once you're in, are you really going to be upset that he's letting others in, too? Jesus invites us today to get over ourselves, and since he was willing to die so that we might live, maybe we should listen to him. Christ who died now lives. You who were lost are now found. So leave the grumbling and complaining behind; that stuff is just the golden calf revisited. Repent! You've been found! There's no room for golden calves at Jesus' party; it's a celebration for sheep, invited by the Lamb. So come on in. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.