

“God’s Joy in the Lost and Found”

Dr. Catherine Cavanagh - September 14th, 2025

Wall Street United Church

Scripture: Luke 15:1–10: *The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin*

First of all let me tell you — I am an expert at losing things! So I could really relate to the scripture stories today! Back when I was Catholic I had St Anthony and St Zita on speed dial! I still pretty much constantly misplace my water bottle and my phone. That’s why my water bottle is a bright yellow, in the hopes that I don’t overlook it, but I still leave it all over the place! And I don’t know what I’d do without the ‘*Find My Phone*’ App. So I’m always heartened to read or hear today’s scripture passage because it means the experience of losing things was so relatable (even 2000 years ago!) that Jesus tells not one, not two but *three parables in a row* about it.

Of course, if you were counting, you will notice that we only heard two this morning. After being challenged by the Pharisees, presumably for hanging out with people who they deem as ‘lost’, Jesus first tells the story of the lost sheep, then the story of the lost coin, and immediately after that he launches into the story of the Prodigal Son. That story is about a rich young fellow who demands his inheritance from his father, then goes and squanders it. He then has a change of heart and goes seeking his father again, whereupon — just as in the previous two parables — a great party is held. But that is such a long, beautiful and complex parable that we’ve set it aside for another day.

But the fact that Jesus launches into three parables in a row emphasizes that there’s a lesson here, or maybe several lessons he really wants us to grasp. And it’s not about lost water bottles (sadly, for me!). What then is it about?

There are two major interpretations of the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. You’re probably familiar with one of them, which is the interpretation which says that Jesus or God is represented by the shepherd and by the woman.

It's a beautiful and loving representation of God for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, it reminds us that God wants and loves ALL of us. It doesn't matter if God has 99 others — if you are lost, God is looking for you, and if you will allow it, God will take you on his shoulders no matter what kind of a smelly old sheep you are, and carry you home. This is not about practicality. This is about love. Excessive love. Love that cannot rest until the one who wandered away is brought back.

It says a lot about God. Shepherds themselves were amongst the bottom dwellers of society. They were dirty, and they spent all their time away from the community. Women also were rarely used in analogies for God. So when Jesus uses the analogy of a shepherd or a woman for God, just by virtue of the example itself he's saying something about *where we should be* and *where God situates the divine*. Not with the powerful in society. God is felt most deeply amongst those who have the least. Think about that.

This interpretation aligns with what Jesus says in the Gospel of John: *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep."* (John 10:11)

So hold onto that. Don't lose sight of that interpretation. It's absolutely true.

But there's more going on here. That first interpretation tells us about God. But there's an understanding of these texts that also tells us a lot about us. It doesn't conflict with the first, it deepens it.

In order to understand this second interpretation, we need to start with the setting. Luke, the writer, always starts his stories by giving us the situation, and it always matters.

In this case, Luke tells us that tax collectors and sinners were gathering to listen to Jesus. These were people on the margins, people whom the Pharisees, who are the third group, saw as "less than," perhaps even 'lost'. Picture it in your mind. A large group gathering, pressing in, trying to see and hear Jesus, while the Pharisees stand a little apart not wanting to be in contact with these sinners. Those were the rules of the day for the religiously observant.

According to the text they're muttering *"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them"*. Imagine! According to the rules of the time, people were supposed to change their ways and start obeying the 613 religious rules first. Then and only

then should you offer them hospitality. Jesus of course flips that on its head. Jesus offers the hospitality first, and the justice of inclusion.

The terms used here to describe the people are interesting. A 'sinner' in Jesus' day was anyone who was judged to be outside God's favour or judged to have broken religious laws. Maybe they were sick — that was a sign of God's disfavour. Maybe they worked on the Sabbath to feed their family. That would be breaking a religious law. It's also possible that these 'sinners' really were guilty of doing something wrong, like lying or stealing or worse. Religious laws like the Ten Commandments have enduring value after all. I don't want to minimize that.

And in our day, as in Luke's, we still have to be careful with the word '*sinner*'. There have been times, and still are times, when churches have weaponized that word just as the Pharisees did in Jesus' day. People have been told they're "sinners" because of who they love, because of their gender identity, because of where they come from, because of poverty or addiction or difference. And none of that judgement comes from Christ. So we need to be careful with that word. The United Church more often refers to us all as being 'broken' in some way as opposed to using the loaded word 'sinner'.

That's the sinners, but the reading also includes Tax Collectors. They were local people who were collaborators with the Romans, and helped maintain the occupation by collecting Roman taxes. And they were hated for it. Luke sets them apart in his description as a way of recognizing systemic injustice, and making clear that those who collaborate in it and don't stand up to it are in need of Christ's grace in order to change.

Now, the third group present that day were the Pharisees. It's easy to caricature the Pharisees as villains. But they were serious people, deeply committed to their faith, and they wanted to protect their tradition. Their problem with Jesus wasn't that they hated people; it was that he blurred the boundaries they thought were necessary. They felt they already had all the answers and all the rules, and so they had lost track of the fact that *they too* were lost without God. The rules had taken God's place.

The problem from Jesus' perspective is not that there are sinners there. He's happy they're there. The problem is that the Pharisees are judging them, as if they themselves don't also sin.

The Pharisees are the people that Jesus is primarily addressing. And when he starts telling the story of the Lost Sheep, he actually invites all of the listeners to take a place in it, to see themselves there. This is often overlooked. He literally says, *“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them.”* Who’s the shepherd now?

Think about that for a minute. In the first interpretation, God is the shepherd seeking us. In this second interpretation, *we* are the shepherd? Yes! In this interpretation, we are invited to be seekers, just like Jesus’ listeners. We are invited to seek out God, not to mention the lost ... and bring them home. We are invited to have a party for them! People who are homeless or hungry? Come to Sunday supper or Friday breakfast! People who need prayer? Our doors are open! People who are struggling with injustice? Our voices will be raised! When the Pharisees mutter, *“He welcomes sinners and eats with them,”* we want to answer ***“So do we!”***

These two interpretations don’t clash. We are called to be Christ’s hands and feet on earth, so of course whatever example of a loving, hospitable, and just God we find is the example we should follow.

In doing this, it doesn’t matter that we are broken, or if you prefer *‘sinners’* ourselves. In the story today, it is the sinners and tax collectors who are pressing in and seeking Jesus already at the start of the reading, just like the shepherd who searches for his sheep. The difference between them and the Pharisees is not that they’re broken and the Pharisees aren’t, it’s that *the Pharisees don’t know they’re broken, and the sinners do*. The *‘sinners’* know they need to be made whole by the grace of God. They know they need to change and be changed.

If we allow ourselves to recognize our own brokenness — something the Pharisees were not doing — we can experience deeper empathy with others who also feel broken. Leonard Cohen might describe that as *‘the crack that lets the light in.’*

But there’s something else to remember.

Although I said that we are called to go out and seek the lost and forgotten, our search actually begins internally, with us. We too have parts of ourselves where we may feel lost. We all have things we struggle with that make us feel sometimes

as if we're not good enough or we don't belong. The Pharisees may have been harsh, but the worst judgements are the ones we put upon ourselves.

What does it mean to be broken? What have you lost in your life? What are you missing? What part of you doesn't maybe feel quite whole? What is it you are searching for today? And remember, we don't mind what your wounds are. You belong here. We all have been wounded. Life does that. These parables invite us to examine our wounds and to go on a search for wholeness with God. And we will find it too.

Just a little bit further on in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus says: *"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."* (Luke 11:9). Doesn't that fill you with joy? When we're asked to work to seek ways to repair ourselves, and also asked to work for a better world — it may seem on the surface that we're being asked to do two things. But we're not. It's all one and the same. It's about bringing ourselves and others home at the same time. It's about allowing ourselves to experience God's grace.

I do want to say a word or two about 'repentance' because in the reading Jesus says *"There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents."* So let's talk for a minute about what it means to repent. Repentance can be a scary word. It's been used to inflict guilt and shame. But in the original Greek, the word is *metanoia*, which simply means "to turn around," "to change direction." It's coming home! It's allowing ourselves, when we need it, to be carried on the shoulders of the shepherd. That's grace!

Changing direction can be a bit scary sometimes. Sometimes it's changing our thinking and sometimes it's changing our actions. There's a need for risk-taking on our part if we're going to allow that to happen. But there are a lot of people who have done it. Think of the early disciples and apostles. Think of Dorothy Day, a woman who converted to Christianity as an adult during the Depression years. She began opening Houses of Hospitality and feeding and clothing the poor, for which she was celebrated. She also protested war and segregation, for which she was arrested. What about Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr? What would he think or say about the horror in Gaza today? Or Rosa Parks?

Or how about Charles Feeney? Maybe you don't know him. He was the founder of "Duty Free Shoppers" and he made an unimaginably huge fortune during his lifetime. Imagine the temptation to keep that wealth to himself! But he'd been brought up Christian and something didn't feel right. He tried living with wealth for a while, but it felt empty and meaningless. He felt lost, and at some point he experienced a 'metanoia' or repentance, and he just changed the way he lived, trusting that what was good for others was good for him. He lived to age 90, and when he died he owned only one pair of shoes ... because he said that's all he could wear at one time! He died in 2023, having achieved his goal of giving away his wealth while still alive. I think there must have been much joy in heaven.

Now most of us aren't going to struggle with the temptation of what to do with unimaginable wealth. But we may at times also feel an emptiness or loss in our lives where we need to change directions. What do we dare to risk for a better self and a better world? What direction will we take to be a seeker? Whatever we choose, God will go with us. And then, oh the celebrating and joy in heaven!

If there is one word that runs through these parables, it is *joy*.

When the sheep is found, there is joy. And a party!

When the coin is found, there is joy. And a party!

When one of us experiences metanoia, there is joy in heaven. And a really big party!

The gospel is about joy—God's joy in us, God's joy in love, God's joy in the lost being found. And our joy, because that matters to God too.

So my friends, you are not lost. You are not alone. You are not unimportant.

You and I are called to follow in the footsteps of our God, a God we can imagine as a shepherd laughing with delight, or a woman dancing with her neighbours, or a street preacher gathering the seekers to himself in ancient Palestine while heaven itself bursts into song.

That is the God Jesus reveals, that is the God we follow, and that is the God who is looking for you, and will carry you in joy all the way home. AMEN