

Lost Luke 15 10/6/19

A number of years ago, I was leading a group of young people through a wild cave in West Virginia. I had been in this cave a number of times before. It had several parallel passages, some on the same level, and some that dropped down lower. I was able to guide the group through a couple of tricky passages to get them all the way to the back of the cave, where there is evidence of the saltpeter mining that was done there during the Civil War. Everything was going great!

However, as we turned around to head back out of the cave, I had difficulty finding the opening that would take us over to the main passage from which we would exit the cave. I knew the general direction we needed to go, but I couldn't find the way out! I didn't want to let the group know that we were a little lost, so I made a game out of it, asking everyone to pair up and explore all the side passages to see if any of them went anywhere. Even though I knew we'd eventually find our way out, inside I was feeling just a little panicky and I even began to question if I really did know the right direction we should be going! It was a disorienting and very uncomfortable feeling. After several false explorations, two kids stumbled onto the correct passage, which I recognized as soon as I saw it, and I led the group the rest of the way out. And, believe me, I quietly offered a prayer of thanksgiving! Parents hate it when you lose their kids.

Have you ever been lost? As a child? While driving? On a hike? Have you ever been spiritually lost? In today's scripture passage from Luke 15, Jesus gives us three parables about being lost. We'll focus mostly on the first one. First, a little background. *Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."* (Luke 15:1,2) The Pharisees were meticulous keepers of the Law, which they saw as God's great gift to humanity. And they believed that following the letter of the law was how you pleased God.

They looked down on other Jews who didn't follow the law as closely, whom they called the "People of the Land." They were the hoi polloi, riff-raff. And the Pharisees made it their goal to avoid associating with such people, lest they become defiled by the association. They tried to avoid making business deals with them. They certainly wouldn't marry them. And they would never sit down and eat with them. And here comes Jesus, supposedly a holy man, who seemed to attract such people, and often shared meals with them, implying that he accepted them! They are really put off by this!

In response, Jesus tells them a parable. ³*So he told them this parable: ⁴"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? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷Just 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. ⁸"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? ⁹When 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.' ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:3-10)

Let's look at the parable a little more closely. Shepherds had a demanding job. Since so little of the hilly, desert-like land in Israel could grow anything, the shepherd had to continually lead the sheep to places where they could feed and drink. The sheep could never find such places on their own. And he had to keep them safe from falling into chasms or off of ledges, as well as protect them from predators. The shepherd was responsible for every single sheep entrusted to him. If he took 100 sheep out to graze, he had better bring 100 sheep back to the fold. If he lost one, he had to pay for it!

In this case, when he gathers the sheep together, he discovers that one is missing. So, he leaves the 99 (presumably in a safe place), and searches for the lost one until he finds it, and then carries it back on his shoulders and celebrates its safe return! Jesus says that's the way it is when one sinner (or lost person) repents and returns to God. Let's go a little deeper.

First, the parable answers the Pharisees' complaint about Jesus' associating with obvious sinners. (The Pharisees were sinners too, with their pride and judgementalism; It just wasn't as obvious!) Anyway, like the shepherd, God seeks out lost people to rescue and save. That's why Jesus hung out with such people.

And that tells us something about God's character. Some of us have gotten the notion that God is just waiting to jump on us whenever we sin. Here, God is taking the initiative to look for us when we're lost- not to judge and punish us. God is a God of compassion and forgiveness and grace. The same thing happens in the parable of the lost coin- the woman takes the initiative to seek for the lost coin, rejoicing when she finds it. God loves lost people and searches for them until he finds them.

Mary McLaurine has an unusual condition called "developmental topographical disorientation" or DTD. This means that she is unable to form a mental picture of her surroundings. And, she has no internal

compass. So, she gets lost. A lot. She describes one such experience like this, “I was staying in a friend’s home and decided to take their dog, Otis, for a walk. As I started back, I had no idea where I was. I was only blocks from where I had started my walk, but I was lost. Fear and adrenaline pulsed through my veins and I began to sweat profusely. My surroundings looked completely unfamiliar. It was as though I’d been dropped into the middle of a foreign land.” Fortunately, some one came to her aid, and she made it safely back to her friend’s house. But her condition of being constantly lost is how the parable describes the human condition.

Like Mary McLaurine, we are also “lost,” but in a spiritual sense. What might spiritual lostness look like? We might be directionless, lacking a purpose in our lives, bouncing from job to job or activity to activity or relationship to relationship in a vain quest for meaning. We might lack the spiritual strength to be the kind of people we long to be- courageous, diligent, faithful, compassionate, loyal, able to resist temptation, etc. And we might have trouble figuring out what is most important in our lives. We’re spiritually lost.

And the problem is, that until we come up against some kind of major set-back, it’s easy to pretend that we’re not lost. And that keeps us from being found! That was the problem of the Pharisees. In her book, *A Field*

Guide to Getting Lost, Rebecca Solnit talks about her friend Sallie, who is part of a search-and-rescue team in the Rocky Mountains. Sallie recalled the frantic search one afternoon for a lost eleven year-old boy, who was deaf and losing his eyesight. Fortunately, they found him the next day, blowing a whistle he had been given for just this kind of situation.

Sallie noted that kids are found and rescued more often than adults, because they are quicker to realize and admit to themselves that they are lost. They tend to find a safe place to hunker down and wait for their rescuers, rather than trying to rescue themselves, and becoming more lost in the process. They know how precarious their situation is, and they admit it.

And that brings us to the third parable that Jesus tells the Pharisees. It's one of his best-known parables, the story of the lost son. You'll recall that the younger of two brothers demanded his share of his inheritance while his father was still alive. He took it and left home, squandering his inheritance in "dissolute living." I'm not sure exactly what that means, but it can't be good! At any rate, now poor and desperately hungry, he begins working at the lowest, vilest kind of job a good Jewish boy could imagine—slopping pigs for a farmer. And then something happened. ¹⁷*But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go*

to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ²⁰*So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. (Luke 15:17-20)*

He was reconciled with his father! But it all started when "he came to himself." He recognized that he was lost and decided to throw himself on his father's mercy, repenting of his bad behavior in humility. And his father warmly received him back.

The first two parables remind us that God is seeking after lost people like you and me. He desires to find and save us. The third parable reminds us that we have a role to play, too. Our role is to admit that we are lost and turn to our Heavenly Father, trusting his mercy, assured that God will graciously receive us as he has done for so many others, so that we are no longer lost. And having a connection with your Creator goes a long way toward helping you find out why you're here and what you're supposed to be doing! Have you done that? Have you admitted to God that you are spiritually lost and in need of help? That's the starting point for all of us.

And that is what we celebrate when we celebrate the Lord's Supper! That God is waiting for us, eager for our return to him.