

March 30, 2025
Luke 15:1-7
Rev. Kelley Becker

When my kids were young, they enjoyed playing a game called "What's Missing?" I would put a bunch of objects on the kitchen table, and they would study them for 15 seconds then turn their backs and I would take one of the objects away. When they turned around, they had to identify which object was missing. Since today's theme is "lost and found," I thought it would be fun to play.

***What's Missing Round 1 Slide 1**
(15 seconds)

***What's Missing Round 1 Slide 2**
What is missing? (3 prong plug)

***What's Missing Round 2 Slide 1**
(15 seconds)

***What's Missing Round 2 Slide 2**
What is missing? (cross)

When we played the game, we knew something was missing it was just a matter of recalling what that something was.

But have you ever found something you didn't know you had lost?

When I was in high school, I came out to the parking lot after school one afternoon, and my driver's license was on the ground next to my car. I apparently had lost it that morning and had no idea it was missing until I found it.

Similarly, at our house, every time we move the furniture to vacuum, we find the dog toys we didn't know were lost. And when I clean out the junk drawer in the kitchen, I find a whole host of things I didn't know to look for yet. You know...the things that were sitting on the counter that I stuffed in a drawer when the doorbell rang.

Losing objects is frustrating; losing people is terrifying. I will never forget the expression on the face of Kevin's mom in *Home Alone* when she realized they were on their way to Paris without their youngest son.

And I remember the moment I turned around at our hometown's zoo and my youngest son, Andrew, had vanished. I was horrified and immediately felt like the most irresponsible human alive. Who loses a whole child?

It turns out almost every parent does at some point, but still...

Thinking about that, I've wondered this week if that is how the person in today's parable felt when he realized one of the sheep was lost, "Who loses a whole sheep?" This is Luke 15:1-7.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

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?

5 And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.'

7 Just 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.

This parable is the first in a series of three the author of Luke used to address Jesus' habit of eating with "sinners." He implies that this is the reason Jesus was so popular with the crowds, but it was also the reason he attracted complaints from the Pharisees and scribes. A quick reminder here that the Pharisees and scribes were not bad people. They thought they were doing their job, protecting the Jewish tradition. And Jesus wasn't anti-Jewish law, he was committed to seeing the Law through the lens of love.

The point the author was trying to make to his original audience was that Jesus went in search of things that were lost (the sheep, the coin, and the son in these three parables) and these stories highlight God's love and concern for the ones the author labeled "tax collectors and sinners." We know this is the author's point because he tells us in the final verse, "Just 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."

***Naked Pastor cartoon**

I wonder, though, if this is really the message of the parable, how we feel about this popular piece of art, created as a response to this story? If the parable is about people who have "sinned" turning from their sin and being scooped up by the love of God, what are we saying about members of the Queer Community? I like this image. I don't think the problem is the image. I do think members of the Queer Community and all the rest of us are scooped up by the love of God, but being gay or trans is not a sin, so perhaps the problem with this image is in our interpretation of Jesus' words.

I have talked before about the work of the biblical scholars in the Jesus Seminar. One of the areas of research they have focused on is the origin of the words attributed to Jesus in the gospels...you know, the words some Bible publishers like to print in red.

Here, in Luke 15: 1-7, the Jesus Seminar scholars have determined that verses 4-6 likely originated with Jesus, while the verses that bookend 4-6 are the creative work of the author of Luke. This means that scholars believe Jesus told a story like this at some point, but he did not tell it in this setting, and when he told the story, he did not assign the meaning to it that the author has. I don't have time in this sermon to talk

about the full process and scholarship used by the Jesus Seminar scholars, but if you are interested, I would love to chat about it later. I will say, I have a lot of confidence in their work.

There is certainly value in understanding the point the author was trying to make for his audience more than a generation after Jesus' death, especially if our desire is to understand the narrative as a whole. Luke interprets these three "lost" parables allegorically, his use of them reflecting the pastoral interests of the Jesus movement after Jesus' death. In other words, at that moment, it was important that Luke's community hear a message of God's love for even the ones who had made some mistakes, the ones who were working for Rome, even the Jews who were taking advantage of other Jews, even the ones with a lot of money that they weren't using to help other people. This message included the joy that comes from restoring family, home, and community. It's a good message. And for sure it is in keeping with who I believe God is.

But since we are followers of Jesus, aren't you a little curious about how Jesus used this story? I am. I want to know what point *Jesus* made when he said: "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? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.' These are the real letter words.

In her book, *Short Stories by Jesus*, Jewish scholar Amy Jill Levine offers this explanation, "The parable presents a main figure---the owner, not the sheep ---who realizes he has lost something of value to him. He notices the single missing sheep among the ninety-nine in the wilderness. For him, the missing sheep, whether it is one of a hundred or a million, makes the flock incomplete. He engages in an exaggerated search, and when he has found the sheep, he engages in an equally exaggerated sense of rejoicing, first by himself and then with his friends and neighbors. If this fellow can experience such joy in finding one of a hundred sheep, what joy do we experience when we find what we have lost?"¹ I have to say, I was pretty overjoyed when I found Andrew in the petting zoo part of the zoo, petting goats. It turns out, he had no idea he was lost.

I knew immediately Andrew was lost. There are sometimes, maybe a lot of times, though, when we live our lives not ever knowing what or who we've lost and sometimes not until what or who we've lost has been found. I can't help but be impressed by the shepherd who noticed one of his sheep was lost. That's a lot of sheep to keep track of.

¹ Levine, Amy Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus*, (Harper Collins: New York, 2014), 44-45.

Have you ever tried to guess how many M&Ms are in a jar? Could you tell the difference between a jar with 99 M&Ms in it, as opposed to 100? I would think that would be a lot like noticing one sheep among 100 was lost.

This story causes me to wonder, what are we missing? Who is lost?

In a commentary on this story, Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Pastoral Care at Columbia Theological Seminary, Dr. Mindy McGarrah Sharp talks about her experiences in the classroom watching and listening to seminary students find their voices. She writes, “As a teacher, bearing witness to a student who finds their voice, is joyous. With newfound courage, freer students glow. What they did or didn’t realize was lost is now found...When a found voice claims its rightful power, there is almost always rejoicing.” McGarrah Sharp goes on to acknowledge that amid the joy, though, there is the pain of our “obliviousness that voices were missing” in the first place and they have often gone unnoticed.²

Missing voices are everywhere. The voices of people with uteruses have been largely missing as legislators have made decisions about women’s health and bodies. The same is true of legislation that impacts the healthcare of trans people.

The voices of people of color have been missing in city planning conversations about gentrification, food deserts, and eco-justice. According to the website of the National Center for Biotechnology Information, redlining has created unequal living conditions and environmental protection issues. For example, Black and Brown neighborhoods are located on land more likely to flood or face other damage from natural disasters. Superfund sites, which are locations contaminated with hazardous substances that have been designated by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for cleanup, are very often in Black and Brown communities.³

I was actually surprised to find this information still available on a government website because of the current administration’s disdain for anything they deem related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We are losing a lot right now and it is important to notice it, so that it isn’t lost forever. These examples are a bit of a moving target as information is taken down and then when there is a public outcry about it, they claim it was a mistake and sometimes put it back up. But here are a few examples of what we are losing on our nation’s websites:

- Arlington National Cemetery removed its education programs about the history of women and people of color in the armed services.
- The Army and the Navy removed web pages about the history of women in the military.
- A page celebrating the military service of baseball legend Jackie Robinson, who integrated major league baseball, was also been taken down.

² McGarrah Sharp, Mindy, commentary on Luke 15:1-7 for Sanctified Art, Everything [in] Between series.

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK611582/>, accessed, 3/28/25.

- The Air Force took down, among other pages, a 2019 profile of the 10 women who piloted one specific stealth bomber that carried out important missions.⁴

Erasure is alive and well. And I anticipate great joy the moment we begin to hear and see that this is changing not only on government websites, but our nation in general.

From my perspective, some of these same voices are missing from the Church today. In many traditions, the voices of women in leadership remain lost. I wish I had \$100 for every time someone in the community has responded to something I've written with, "She's a heretic. Women cannot be pastors." Followed by a quote from our beloved Paul. And in so many churches, people in the Queer Community don't have a voice because, of course, "unrepentant sinners can't be members or can't be leaders." What a stupid thing to say. I am proud that again and again, this congregation has experienced the joy that comes from listening to Queer and female voices and other voices that have been silenced in traditional Christianity, like the voices of children.

If we are listening to the voice of Jesus, we must hear that there are some people who are still lost. And not lost because of the traditional church narrative that they "don't believe the right things," but lost because they don't feel welcome or maybe lost because they are afraid to be their authentic selves in this world or in the Church. That is especially painful since Jesus seemed to be telling his followers that within communities of Jesus followers, everyone should be welcome as they are, and we will never be whole until everyone has been gathered. Dr. McGarrah Sharp wonders, "Maybe none of us are found until all of us are found."⁵

I have a hunch, though, that it is really hard to focus on the work of finding other people when we have not tended to our own lostness. What are you missing? What parts of you feel lost?

Wednesday night at the Common Ground service I realized that there had been a part of me that was feeling lost and I didn't realize it until it was found. What I knew is that lately I have been in a mood I just couldn't shake...it was kind of sadness, weariness, and discontent all rolled together into a delightful ball of anger. There is so much about the job of being a minister that is necessary but doesn't always connect with the reasons some of us were called to ministry. Producing newsletters and bulletins, refereeing disagreements, tracking down why a ceiling tile has a water stain, cleaning up kitchen messes I didn't leave, and checking mousetraps are some of those things. Rev. Hubbard and I have a habit of saying that ministry is really good when it's good and really bad when it's bad. And the longer I am a minister, the truer that is.

On Wednesday night, as I presided over communion using words written by someone who I know hasn't always felt welcome, especially in churches...his words and the privilege of sharing them, helped me understand the mood I had been trying to shed; I

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/19/nx-s1-5317567/federal-websites-lgbtq-diversity-erased>, accessed, 3/27/25.

⁵ McGarrah Sharp, Mindy, commentary on Luke 15:1-7 for Sanctified Art, Everything [in] Between series.

was lost. The part of me that became a minister because I wanted to find ways to make God accessible to everyone, has been lost to paperwork, facilities management, and the constant nag that I am not enough. But in that moment at the communion table, I remembered the parts of this work that find my soul over and over again, the ones that really matter. And I felt the anger I've been feeling disappear and it was replaced by gratitude. I felt joy.

If you are feeling a little lost for reasons like those or different ones, know that you are not alone. Being lost sometimes is part of being human, and we are being found again and again...by Love. And what I know is that Love finds us in the in-between, in the community that happens while we are trying to find ourselves or the community that helps us discover what's lost. And Jesus was right, there is joy in the journey. There is so much joy in being seen and heard. There is so much joy in realizing that love is not finite, there is enough for all of us. You, dear ones, and the ways you find our neighbors and each other are sources of joy in this world and we need that joy right now. Please remember that even in your moments of lostness, you have already been found. Amen.