

God loves the wrong people

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

1 Timothy 1:12–17; Psalm 51 (sung); Luke 15:1–10

Christine Colliar, Reader

‘They wandered about the whole night, and the next day too, from morning till evening, but they could not find their way out of the wood.’ That’s how the Brothers Grimm describe Hansel and Gretel, two children lost in the forest, far from the comfort and protection of home, caught in a nightmare of hunger and fear.

Do you recognize what this is from? ‘She had not gone far from the path when she met a wolf.’ Yes, Little Red Riding Hood. One small step off the track, one small choice, and suddenly she is lost, exposed to danger, and risking being devoured.

What about this one? ‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’ It’s Alice in Wonderland, when Alice has wandered into a bewildering land where nothing makes sense and every turn looks the same.

You will be familiar with many more fairy tales, full of lost children and wandering paths. These tales are more than bedtime stories. Told around firelight in dark villages, they were warnings, don’t stray too far, don’t lose your way, don’t step off the path. And there are more modern stories told in the fairy-tale tradition, like JM Barrie’s ‘Peter Pan’, with lost boys who are not lost in the geographical sense – they know where they are, in Neverland – but they don’t *belong* to anybody.

Today, there are numerous books, films, and TV series about being lost. We are fascinated with being lost: to be lost is to be vulnerable, to be alone, to be in danger. There remains, deep-seated in the human psyche, the fear of being unclaimed, of not belonging to anybody. And we enjoy these stories because they let us hold onto the hope that the lost might be found, that those who don’t belong might yet be claimed, that home might still be waiting, which is invariably the case in fairy tales and in the books and films in our culture today.

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That sense of lostness, not just in the forest, not just on the road, but deep inside the soul, is something that Jesus addresses in today’s reading from Luke.

Luke tells us that tax collectors and sinners are drawing near to Jesus, while the Pharisees and scribes mutter, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ To them, Jesus is loving the wrong people, embracing people who are unworthy, letting in those who should be kept out.

In response, Jesus tells stories.

First, a shepherd with a hundred sheep. One wanders off. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the open country, the wilderness, to go and search until he finds the one. He doesn’t shrug and say, ‘Ninety-nine is enough.’ He searches, he carries the lost sheep on his shoulders, and when he comes home he calls friends and neighbours to rejoice with him.

Then, a woman with ten silver coins. She drops one somewhere in the house. She lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until she finds it. And when she does, she too calls her neighbours to come for a party, to rejoice with her.

The parables are Jesus' answer to the Pharisees' grumbling: Yes, those sinners are exactly the ones that God goes out searching for. And Jesus drives home the point, 'There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.' He would like the Pharisees to get rid of their frowny faces and come and join the celebration.

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The word Jesus uses for 'lost' comes from the Greek verb ἀπόλλυμι (apollymi). It means far more than 'misplaced'. It can carry the sense of being ruined, cut off, even perishing.

A sheep that is described as ἀπολωλός (apolōlós) is not merely out of sight. It is cut off from the flock, in real danger, unable to survive on its own.

A coin that the woman says ἀπώλεσα (apólesa), 'I lost', is not destroyed. It is cut off from its purpose, unable to be used until it is restored to the hand that treasures it.

So lostness in Jesus' parables is not so much about misplacing something. Rather, it's about being cut off from where you belong, unable to return by yourself.

And notice that the sheep does nothing to save itself; the coin cannot roll back to the purse. What ends the lostness is not their effort, but the determination of the shepherd and the woman.

The parables show us that God searches, keeps searching, and refuses to give up.

We may think of being lost as subjective, *I don't know where I am, I can't find the path*. But in these parables, lostness is objective. It is about being lost *to someone else*.

The sheep is lost to the shepherd. The coin is lost to the woman. And the shepherd and the woman feel the absence.

We are not just disoriented wanderers. We are God's own, and when we are separated, God feels the absence. Lostness means that the body of Christ is incomplete until God finds us again.

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This theme of lostness and being found is exactly what Paul reflects on in the passage from First Timothy. In verses 13 to 15 he says, 'Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst.'

Paul looks back on his life and sees himself as the wrong person to receive grace. He was lost in active rebellion, determined to stamp out the followers of Christ, deliberately heading the wrong way. His lostness was not passive but very active. Paul was as terrifying to the fledgling Christian community as the most brutal figures of modern history.

And yet Christ came to him. On the road to Damascus, in a blaze of light, Jesus stopped him literally in his tracks. Paul did not find God, God found Paul. Paul was not the seeker, he was the sought. And in that moment his life was turned upside down.

He says that his own story is an example, that if Christ could show mercy to him, the 'worst of sinners', then no one is beyond God's patience. His life is a living testimony that the lost can be found.

And like the shepherd and the woman, Paul ends with joy, with doxology: 'to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever.'

Paul knows what it means to be lost, and he knows the great joy of being found.

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It's tempting to ask about the ninety-nine. Doesn't the shepherd abandon them recklessly? But this is a parable, an allegory. Jesus isn't giving a shepherding manual. The point isn't that the flock is left to danger, but that God's heart is so set on the one who is lost that nothing matters more than finding that one. And like sheep that stay close to their own grazing patch – I discovered that shepherds call this hefting – the flock was safe while the shepherd searched.

Perhaps Jesus' sharpest point is for the Pharisees. When he says the ninety-nine 'have no need of repentance,' it may have been tongue in cheek, since the Pharisees would see themselves in that category. It may have been a jibe at them, for who truly needs no repentance? The Pharisees scrupulously kept the 613 laws of the Torah, and then added even more laws on top, to make sure none were broken. The Pharisees thought they were safe. They thought they belonged among the ninety-nine. But they, too, were lost, lost in self-righteousness, lost in blindness to grace.

Lostness is not only wandering away, it is also thinking we never left. And the parable calls both the obviously lost and the apparently found back to the Shepherd.

That Greek word I mentioned, *apollymi*, it appears again in John 3:16:

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish ἀπόληται (*apolētai*), but may have eternal life.'

In Luke 15, the same verb family describes lostness that can be undone, a sheep that is found, a coin that is recovered.

In John 3:16, it carries the heavier weight of perishing, the ultimate ruin of a life cut off from God.

Together, these texts stretch the word across a spectrum, from temporary estrangement to final destruction. And in both cases the answer is the same, God acts in love to prevent the ruin, to end the lostness, to bring restoration.

The Episcopal writer, Debbie Thomas, puts it like this, ‘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.’¹ God is where lostness reigns.

That is both comforting and challenging.

- Comforting, because it means that when we feel most lost, God is closest, searching, sweeping, and calling.
- Challenging, because if we want to be where God is, we cannot simply sit safely among the ninety-nine. We must go with God, into the wilderness, into the cracks of the floor, into the places of lostness.

To be lost today is not usually to wander in a literal forest, or to find our gps has gone wrong. But we know lostness all too well:

- Lost when grief leaves us feeling cut off from God’s goodness.
- Lost when shame or guilt makes us doubt that we could ever belong.
- Lost when faith feels dry and empty, like prayer turning to dust in our mouths.
- Lost when our lives spin with distraction, and we drift from the centre that gives us meaning.
- Lost even in religion, when we cling to rules and forget grace, like the Pharisees.

Lostness is about separation from life, from belonging, from God. And yet into our lostness the Shepherd comes. Yesterday, as we celebrated the life of our dear brother Simon, the choir sang words that give voice to the longing to being shepherded out of lostness, from the adaptation of Psalm 23 by Marty Haugen – ‘Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.’ That is what it means to be found, to be carried by the Shepherd who does not give up on us, who leads us through death into life.

The parables tell us that God searches for us, in grief, in shame, in dryness, in distraction. Being found is never our own achievement. We don’t climb back to God by our own ladders. We are found because God comes searching. God seeks until the one is found. God’s love refuses to stop.

That is Paul’s story. That is the sheep’s story. That is the coin’s story. And it is our story.

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Hansel and Gretel escape the witch, the story ends: Their father rejoiced when he saw them once more. Now all their cares were at an end, and they lived together in perfect happiness.

Red Riding Hood is saved from the wolf, Alice wakes up from her dream. In fairy tales, the lost find their way home, where they belong, the danger passes, and all is well again.

¹ Debbie Thomas, ‘On Lostness’, *Into the Mess and Other Jesus Stories* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022)

And we love those endings, because they whisper of something we long for, that lostness does not have the final word.

Jesus' stories go further. When the lost are found, there is rejoicing, a party, joy in heaven itself. And that means for us. Because there are times we have felt too far gone. There are parts of our lives we are tempted to write off. There are moments when we have wondered if we still belong. Yet in those very moments, God searches for us. In those very places, God refuses to let us go. And in Christ, we are found.