

Luke 15:1-10

Sept. 11, 2022 – GWOH

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

So, what do you think is worse – losing something or being lost?

On the one hand, it is really annoying to not be able to find what you are looking for, right? And on the other hand it can be really scary to be lost in a strange place. So, which is worse?

I don't know about you, but I lose things more and more often these days – including my phone that I just had in my hand. I even bought a little plate that says “where the heck is my phone” to keep my phone in. Yeah – my phone is never in it.

So, what is the most valuable thing you have ever lost? Did you find it? How did you find it?

As a child I got lost a lot because I tended to wander off out of curiosity. These days it is a little more difficult to get lost with smart phones and GPS, and I guess Apple can even help you get around in a store. Is that true? I don't have an Apple phone, so I don't know.

Can you remember the last time you were lost?

I was born and raised in Denver and I was in Rino, which is not what it used to be called, about a year ago. It's an area I'd been in a bunch of times, but now it looks so different that I couldn't find my way out. It should not have been that difficult!

I felt like a real loser when I finally broke out my phone and used Google maps to find my way home. But it just looked so different! And sometimes Google maps also messes me up, especially when it gives me a route I wouldn't have chosen. I like direct shots. I don't care if more turns are less miles. Keep it simple Google!

A friend of mine is much more courageous than me. When she moves some place new, she intentionally gets lost so that she can get to know her surroundings. I usually wait until I have one well known way to get home before I start trying different routes. How about you?

So, when was the last time you were lost? And maybe the last time you were lost wasn't literally being lost, but figuratively being lost – like you use to know what was going on and now you have no idea.

I have to admit that I get a little lost with the gender pronouns these days. You used to be able to just say he or she and have a pretty good idea that that was correct, but now there is the term “they” for those who identify as non-binary.

I had to admit to Wylie, who was visiting here a few weeks ago, how hard it is for me to use “they” for an individual person. But, I do want to honor other people to the best of my ability. Thankfully most theys that I have met are very forgiving.

It’s pretty easy to get lost in a different culture that you aren’t use to navigating through, but you hope to find a good guide that will help you by explaining the terrain, which in my experience has always happened.

So, back to the question. What is worse - losing something or being lost?

In our Gospel reading for today, we have a shepherd with 100 sheep who goes off to find the lost one, and a woman who lost a silver coin and sweeps the whole house until she finds it. This parable is directed at the Pharisees and scribes who were complaining that Jesus was hanging out with sinners and tax collectors.

Now, most people who hear this parable put themselves in the place of the shepherd or the woman, but in all actuality the lost sheep and the lost coin are those who are lost from God – either by their own doing or by the actions of someone else. It really doesn’t matter how they got lost, only that they are lost.

Sinners and tax collectors had been separated from God. On the one hand they were cursed by the Pharisees and scribes who demanded correct behavior and on the other hand they were lost in their own shame. They didn’t really need the Pharisees and scribes to tell them they were “evil,” because they already felt that way.

And here is the thing about shame, it is a spiral that is nearly impossible to get out of by yourself, because we have this negative feedback loop in our brains that likes to take us down into the darkness. It takes someone on the outside to pull us out of the pit, and that is exactly what Jesus does. Jesus searches for those who are lost in shame and pulls them back out into the light and rejoices with them that they have been set free from the burden they were carrying. God and the found rejoice and invite the entire community to join in.

If you have ever known someone stuck in the shame spiral, you know that feeling of desperation you feel for that person. “You did something bad, but you are not a bad person! These things happen. I still love you!”

Parents understand the tricky balance of disciplining a child. You want to correct the behavior while simultaneously letting the child know they are still loved. The behavior was wrong, but the person is loved. As the old saying goes, hate the sin, love the sinner.

Guilt and shame are two different things. Guilt is the appropriate feeling for doing a wrong behavior. With guilt we go and say we are sorry and repair the relationship. That's what guilt should lead us to. Shame, on the other hand, is a wall that gets built higher and higher the longer we sits in it, and that is dangerous. That can lead to death.

During this month of suicide prevention, please remember that. Guilt is something you can do something about. Shame isn't. Shame requires someone to come from the outside and expel the shame with love. That's what the cross is all about. Jesus takes on shame in order to destroy it forever, and then he is risen from the dead to prove that shame has no power over our relationship with God. Shame is the work of the devil who tells us we are worthless and better off dead. But God says – No! You are to die for!

When we pray, “lead us not into temptation,” we are praying that we will never be tempted to think that we are beyond God's love, and so Jesus comes for the lost. God is the woman and the shepherd in today's parable.

So, for God it is far worse to lose us and for us it is worse to be lost.

And then we have our dear friend Paul. Paul was lost, but he didn't know it – just like the Pharisees and scribes. Paul had no idea he had been taken off to the dark side as he persecuted Christians. He thought he was going what God would have him do, and it's not until Jesus comes to him to tell him to stop killing his followers that Paul realizes that he was in the wrong.

Paul was corrected and he repented and changed his ways. Because of the Christian community that surrounded him, Paul did not fall into shame, but only guilt. And he was forgiven and then set free to share God's good news of love in the world. Paul was a living example of God's mercy. In his conversion, both God and Paul rejoiced, along with the community who no longer had to fear his persecution.

Even though Paul was lost and didn't know it, he was still found. Jesus came to him, he then realized he was lost, and then he was restored. That's why we never give up on people. We never give up on anyone. We love our enemies always hoping for reconciliation, and sometimes love does require a little guilt. When we are hurt, we need to say something so that peace can be known.

So we, like Moses and led by the Holy Spirit, strive to act with compassion.

Before God came as Jesus to us, God had a hard time understanding people. As you know, the first commandment is – God is God and you are not. And here in Exodus, we see that God had to be reminded of that as well. God, you are God and we are not. So Moses has to implore God on the people’s behalf to reconsider killing them all off. They are not you. They don’t understand. And with that realization, God changed God’s mind.

We even hear Jesus on the cross say, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing. They are not you, so have mercy.”

The first commandment used to be a two-sided coin. One side for God and the other side for us. But when Jesus came, Jesus took both sides of the coin and bridged the gap. Today Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father in the flesh, constantly reminding God that we are the created and we don’t fully understand everything, while at the same time the Holy Spirit is with us reminding us of God’s love and Jesus’ act of reconciliation. With Christ, nothing can separate us from the love of God, and so we have nothing to fear.

Many philosophers will say that everything leads to God, but it is only in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior that God comes to us and meets us right where we are. There are no ladders to climb, no tolls to be paid. Everything may lead to God, but only Christ comes to us, and then sends us out to be God’s hands in the world.

As you know, today is God’s Work Our Hands Sunday. Today we use our hands to bless the items we have collected for Running Creek Elementary to let the children who are in need there know that they are loved. Our goal is to be sure that they never feel shamed, especially because they are hungry or in need of a notebook. They may feel guilty about losing their binder, but they should never feel shame for not having one. That is God’s mercy, and that is the work we are sent out to do today, and every day.

God has come to us and for us, and today we go to continue God’s work of destroying shame. We are sent to be guides who point to the light and pull people out of the pit of despair, sharing God’s love with everyone we meet.

God has come in Christ Jesus our Lord, and he comes through us today, by the Holy Spirit, to do God’s work with our hands, feet, and voices.

Thanks be to God. Amen.