

Lost and Found

Luke 15:1-10

January 22, 2023

It seems an obvious observation to note that our methods and means of communication have quickly and permanently changed in recent years. I will offer one example. In my first preaching class in seminary, which doesn't feel like too many years ago, we were urged by our professor to never use the term "Biblical text" in a sermon. Now, why not? Because "text" signified something static, boring, lifeless. Texts belonged in museums and classrooms. They were to be studied as artifacts. And the word "text" was particularly poisonous, in the eyes of my professor, to young people in the pews.

How things have changed. Now even my five-year-old son knows that a text is not lifeless or static. Yesterday, when he wanted to play with a neighbor, I suggested that he simply walk next door and ring the doorbell. Knock on the door and ask. The response: "*But Dad, can't you just text them?*"

Texts are in constant motion around us, through us, between us. Some of you, no doubt, are writing, sending, and receiving texts as I speak. You know who you are, and so do I. The verb form of this noun has come to stay. "Just text them, Dad." A favorite *New Yorker* cartoon: The scene is the hospital nursery, and a newborn is holding a phone above his head, thumbs furiously typing. The bubble above his head reads, "OMG! I just got born!"ⁱ

Just text them. Now perhaps I am overly optimistic about this interest in texts that move, but I think it represents a real opportunity for the Church. You see, for centuries, people of faith have been insisting that Holy Scripture does not just lay idle while we read and interpret it for our lives. Biblical stories do not simply say something, they *do* something. With apologies to my preaching professor, the Bible *texts*

us, absorbing us into its narrative and opening new worlds of possibility. And so, our current series is all about allowing the parables of Jesus to text us with some new message of faith. These stories—these parables—do not describe the world; they create a new one, upside-down, and invite us to live within it.

This week's story begins with controversy, and as usual, Jesus is in the center of it. At issue this week are his eating habits, specifically those with whom he chooses to share the table. The picture in my mind is the middle school cafeteria. Jesus is that child always inviting the *wrong* people to sit next to him. Ignoring the great truth of adolescence—that you are judged by the company you keep—Jesus is spending time with precisely the wrong people if he wants to be recognized as an upright, religious, pure authority figure. Not only is he welcoming them to his table; he is *eating with them*. Sinners.

In response to the outrage of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus tells a parable. More precisely, he tells a set of three parables that relate to one another. They are all stories of the lost and found. Lost sheep, lost coin, lost son. This morning, we read the first two of these parables, and I'm wondering, as you heard them, where you placed yourself in the world within these stories.

Perhaps this morning you were that one lost sheep: afraid, tired, alone, desperately hoping the shepherd might rescue you from danger, desperately hoping he might drape you over his shoulders. Perhaps this morning you are lost. I have suggested before that the moment with the children is, each week, the most anxiety-producing moment in the worship service for any pastor. An example from my former congregation. This was our text for the day, and I

had a brilliant idea. I divided the group of children into sheep and shepherds. And then the sheep were invited to wander, to “get lost” somewhere within the sanctuary while the shepherds counted. Finally, after they had counted, the shepherds were released to go find the lost sheep. They did a beautiful job, and it all went fine until several moments later when I was reading the scripture for the morning. It was then that a voice cried out from under one of the pews, “I’m still lost!” I can’t say how gently, but this lost sheep was rescued swiftly by his parents, and I’ve never tried that exercise in worship again. “I’m still lost.” Sometimes we’re lost. We feel like lost sheep in a world where isolation, distance, and fear seem to be the norm. Where division and faction keep us separated. Sometimes we need to be found, and we all know the relief of that feeling.

But perhaps this morning you were not the lost sheep. Perhaps you took the perspective of the other ninety-nine, the ones left behind in danger while their foolish owner searches for the one renegade. Why is there more rejoicing over that one lost sheep than over the others who stayed right where they belonged, who did what they were supposed to do? It’s a good question, one that stands at the heart of the third parable in this series, the story of a waiting father, a lost son, and a frustrated older brother.

But these two short scenarios seem to have something different in mind. Notice how Jesus begins: “Which one of *you*, having one hundred sheep...”

What if the invitation is to imagine ourselves not as the sheep—wayward or obedient—but as the shepherd? As Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, there is the possibility that these “are not parables about lost sheep and lost coins at all, but parables about good shepherds and diligent sweepers.”ⁱⁱ Maybe we are meant to be the ones who are searching.

If so, the actions Jesus describes seem laughable. Leave *ninety-nine* sheep in search of *one* who is missing? One interpreter notes that the shepherd who does that “will have, at the end of the day, one sheep. Sheep are not among the animal kingdom’s brightest creatures. Sheep stray.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Rip all of the carpet off the floor of your home, move all the heavy appliances out in the yard, move all of the furniture out on the porch, in search of a *nickel*? Now, which one of you would not do that?

Well, of course, the answer is that none of us would do that. We are practical. We have common sense. The actions are impractical. They lack common sense. But this is a parable. The world is upside down, and you have just been texted. It *is* impractical, *unless* that one lost sheep is more than a dumb animal. It *is* nonsensical, *unless* that one coin missing is not just another piece of metal.

These are not stories about lost car keys or a pair of socks, or even a missing phone; these are the weighty things of life: faith, hope, love, friendship, vocation, community, sense of purpose. These are stories of the joy we feel when they show up again, under some long-avoided pile of painful past experiences or behind a barrier we constructed years ago for self-protection. All those places that we don’t want to look or couldn’t bring ourselves to explore. And yet, when we muster the courage to search, we find them.

It is foolish to search for a lost sheep. It is foolish to turn the house inside out in search of one coin. Unless that sheep, that coin, matters most. These stories urge us to search for what matters most, even when that searching seems foolish when measured against the values of the world.

In a culture obsessed with accumulation, ninety-nine beats one every time. Unless that one, in the upside-down world of God’s kingdom, is the most important one. We live in a time of so many competing priorities, so much pressure to do it all now. And then we come to this hour of worship. We have that abundance of questions, uncertainties, and struggles. Cares swirling about us like text messages darting through our minds. Ninety-nine problem sheep to keep track of all the time. Who has the energy to seek out that one that went missing? Can I get everything done before the deadline? How will we ever afford the exponentially rising costs of living? What will the test results show? Why must

relationships be so hard? Is there more to my life than the daily routine? What does the future hold for me, my family, the church, the world? Somehow, we know that this is the place where we will find what matters most. Somehow we sense that what has been missing is what we most need to find. And that's why. That's why we leave everything else behind in search of that one sheep, that one coin buried under the couch cushions.

The message of the parable is: keep looking. The journey matters as much as the destination. Keep searching. There will be detours and dead-ends and frustrations of every kind. Keep seeking. You will be blessed by the presence of fellow travelers, wise mentors, trusted friends. Keep looking. Keep searching. Keep seeking. For what you are after is more precious and valuable than anything that passes for success in this world. *Keep looking.*

There is one more twist in these stories of the lost and found. Yes, we are called to search, but we are not the only ones searching. Yes, we are called to seek, but we are also sought. Even as we look for meaning, purpose, and the presence of God, we are being offered these gifts. So when your searching seems pointless, text this truth: The God who created you still calls you by name.

Listen to this and be joyful: You are valuable in the eyes of God. You matter. The One you seek is always already seeking you. And you too can be found. Amen.

ⁱ Both *New Yorker* cartoons can be found at <http://www.newyorker.com/humor>

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*. Cowley Publications, 1993. p. 150.

ⁱⁱⁱ Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*. HarperOne Publishing, 2014. p. 39.