

## “When God’s Mind Was Changed”

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Exodus 32:7-14

Luke 15:1-10

How many of you lose things in your home? Quick survey: What kinds of things do you lose? Is it your car keys? Is it your reading glasses? Is it your favorite refillable travel coffee mug? The remote control? What else?

I am among you people who lose things. And I admit, I have a pretty casual attitude about it. Unless I have lost my keys and need to be somewhere in the next 5 minutes, I stay cool, thinking, “It will turn up eventually,” and, “if not, it’s just stuff. At least I have my family and my dog. I’m good!” This drives Chris *insane*. She is the shepherd who drops everything-- even the 99 sheep-- until she finds that one missing lamb. She is the woman who turns all the lights on, and sweeps every surface, every corner, every nook and cranny until that lost coin is found. I’m lucky to have someone like that in my life; she always insists that I keep looking, keep pursuing, until I find that lost thing. Without her, the TV would stay dark because I would have given up on finding the remote control years ago, and I would ask the church to do some grocery shopping for me because my wallet would still be wedged between the seatbelt buckle and the passenger seat, as it was on Friday.

There was a time when it seems that God may have also been quick to give up on things. People. There have been many times when God’s people seemed lost. Our lesson from the Hebrew Bible tells us of one of those times. It had been a long time since the people had heard from God. They were looking for leadership. They were looking for presence. But they could only see each other. They wanted more. “Take off all your jewelry,” Aaron said. Aaron was Moses’ brother, and Moses had gone up a mountain to talk to God and it seemed like he would never return. So, the people reached for whatever gold jewelry they had managed to bring out of Egypt. Wives, daughters, sons too: anyone who had anything gave up something. Aaron took the collected treasure, melted it, and poured it into a mold cast. When it cooled, he produced something that the lost Hebrews could see, give offerings to, and worship. “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt!”

And so, in that moment, the people made a choice to worship gold instead of God. Though God had led them out of slavery, led them through the wilderness, led them to find places of water, food, and rest, they were completely lost.

God saw how lost they were, and to be perfectly honest, God was ready to let them stay lost. Let them have their golden calf, these “stiff-necked people!” See how it will help them when I blot them out; “Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.” God figured Moses was faithful; God could just start a new covenant through Moses and his descendents, and forget about Israel.

But Moses begged God to keep pursuing God’s lost people. “O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember the covenant you made with Abraham? Was that a forever promise or not?’”

In other words, Moses told God to stop throwing a temper tantrum and go out and find those lost sheep. And God changed God’s mind. God’s heart melted, like the golden jewelry in the fire. But the substance of God’s changed and melted heart was something of actual value.

I wonder if Jesus was thinking about that story between Moses and God when he came up with the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. Jesus knew God not as some angry, wrathful, score-keeping and jealous God, but one whose heart melts with mercy for those who have strayed. When the religious insiders saw Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners, they grumbled. They were jealous of Jesus’ attentions. They thought, “we are the ones who never strayed. Aren’t we more deserving of your presence and love?”

I used to think when these parables spoke of the sinners, they meant the unchurched, those who did not believe. I used to think that it only took a deathbed conversion, and all of a sudden someone who never knew God could become part of God’s flock, “saved” if you will, no matter how they had lived their lives.

That may indeed be true. But I think these parables from Jesus are especially speaking to those who are already in the flock, those of the faith. For the shepherd, the lost lamb was already from his flock. For the woman with the coins, the lost coin was one of the

ten that already belonged to her. The truth is, we as people of faith can be sinners, too. Sometimes I think that I should add a line to the prayer of confession each week, "For those of us who do not think we have committed any of the sins listed in this prayer, forgive us for our arrogance." Any one of us can find ourselves lost, whether by sin, despair, or just feeling numb to God's presence among us.

But the good news is that being found is not really up to us. Henri Nouwen wrote, "We are not loved for being precious, but we are precious because we are loved." That is the grace of God's love.

As Debie Thomas, a South Asian minister and blogger writes, "If Jesus's parables are true, then 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.*"

Any one of us might experience those times on the Christian journey where we are lost. It could be that the faith that worked for us in one stage of our lives as a burning and passionate fire has turned to cold ash, and as much as we try, we just cannot feel that spark with God again. Some may find a deep disappointment in Christian community; though still believing in God, these people see church folks behaving badly and decide they want no part of it. Still others may grapple with a difficult diagnosis or the loss of a loved one and wonder, "Where can God possibly be? I have lost my guiding light."

When I was a young child, I got lost a lot. I was an active and curious child, always wandering off to see and touch things. My mom actually put a leash on me! But when I got too old for that to be socially acceptable, it was back to getting lost again. When my mom went shopping at the mall, I would wander into the circular clothing racks and sit myself in the middle, feeling the brush of fabric against my skin while I daydreamed about things much more interesting than the mall. At some point I would realize my mom's legs were no longer within view, so I would wander off in search of them, sometimes to a different section of the department store. Desperation would seep in after about 30 seconds of not finding her, and I would start to imagine how sad my life would be without my mom. One time I actually threw myself onto another woman's legs-- she must have been wearing a similar outfit-- and cried out, "Mama!" The woman said kindly, "I'm not your mama, but I can help you find her." I always found my mom-- or more often, she found me. And, she taught me that if I am lost, to stay in place so she could find me again.

Before we wander off even further, or turn to something or someone else to find our peace, before we make our golden calves so that we can worship something we can

feel and touch, it is okay to just stop and wait for God to find *us*. It may not be as immediate as our need demands, but more likely than not, God is already turning on the lamps, sweeping the floor, looking in all the shadowy places where lost things hide, to find us. God *misses us* when we are gone. God *loves us*. God *longs for us*. God experiences loss just like we do.

The great Spanish mystic John of the Cross wrote about something he called *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Even he, a devout religious man, had experiences of feeling devastatingly lost to God. But he also wrote of how these experiences led him to a deeper, sometimes darker, but much more profound and rich understanding of who God is, and what it means to be in relationship with God. For him, being lost and then being found made for a much more profound union with God than if he had continued in his faith without ever being lost.

But today is a celebration, a blessing of our little sheep, the children we love so much, to go with their shepherds, people who will teach them about God's love and the stories of Jesus and our faith through our Sunday School classes. Right now, most of them do not yet feel lost to God. That is the beauty of young faith, and it is something we should learn from. Children are hard-wired to love and be loved. There will come times when they will feel lost, if they have not had those already. But hopefully in church, the love they experience and remember will give them a road map back to God's gracious embrace.

Remembering what we once had with God can activate that longing that helps us to be found again. And so, we meet one another at that table where we have been taught to remember. We remember the stories and the years when God sought us when we were lost. We remember how God showed up in a human body: Jesus. What better way to seek out the lost than to show up as one among us? We remember how Jesus left us a sign of his presence: bread as his body, wine as his blood, so that even when he would not physically be with us, we had a sacrament where we could find him. Come to the table where you will all be counted, where you all matter, where you are all fed. Thank you Jesus. Amen.