**Abandoned in the Wilderness**

September 11, 2016

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

17th Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28

Psalm 14

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

There are more than 105 million parking spaces in America, and your vehicle is probably occupying one of them. But which one? Most of us remember if we parked today in the small lot off Locust or on Rand Place. Maybe we parked in one of the bank lots or behind the library. We usually remember.

Now think Disney World. The parking areas there include more than 46,000 slots, and every day, a good number of guests cannot remember in which one they left their car. Visitors arrive at the theme park revved up to have a good time, and they aren’t paying attention. What’s more, they may be piloting a rental whose color and make they haven’t committed to the deeper part of their memory. (Actually I have come up with a new definition for Disney World – “A People Trap operated by a mouse.”)


Disney employees will help. But, did you know that each parking section has a Disney character name — Chip & Dale, Pluto, Goofy, Dopey, etc. — clearly identified with prominently posted pictures. As arriving guests board the trams that carry them into the park, the tram drivers tell the visitors what lot they are in and urge them to take note. Still, so many people fail to remember that Disney employs a small army called “the parking cast” whose job it is to reassure flummoxed folks and reunite them with their autos.

The *parking cast!* Can you believe it? Only Disney would create a cast for the entertainment event called “Finding Your Car”!

The parking cast uses an array of tools, including perseverance, technology and clues elicited from the guests. For starters, Disney keeps track of when each lot fills. That way, if visitors can remember approximately when they arrived, the cast can narrow the search to specific lots. Disney workers also ask what visitors remember seeing en route to the parking lot. If the misplaced car has OnStar, cast members suggest the driver call it, so a global positioning satellite can pinpoint the misplaced car. Often, Disney employees drive the lost individuals around in company vehicles, *while the guests lean out the window, pushing the panic button on their key chains, hoping the car will sound off!*

Through one means or another, Disney usually manages to re-link guests with their vehicles, finding the lost and enabling park visitors to go on their way. But you can only imagine how a driver might feel when he discovers his car was parked in Dopey.

We don’t know if the members of Disney’s parking cast have a favorite Bible passage, but the two little parables in today’s gospel are good candidates. With their stories of losing and finding, it’s obvious why not only the parking cast but also the hapless guests might identify with them, but there is one point at which the parallels break down: Jesus indicated both the shepherd and the homemaker are so thrilled at finding the lost that they need help to celebrate. Both call neighbors to gather for a party.

But do you suppose that’s how the parking cast members react? For them, helping baffled visitors is all in a day’s work. We doubt they party every time they succeed. As for the chagrined guests, finally stumbling upon the location of their transport no doubt brings a wave of relief and maybe even reprieve, but probably not much joy.

So how do you usually react when you finally locate some missing item? Like most of us, you’ve probably lost and then found not only coins, but keys, glasses, watches, pens, books, socks, slippers and a myriad of other things, but how often have you felt a party was warranted when you found them? So when Jesus asks, “Which one of you would not have a party?” a lot of us would confess that we would not.

Lots of folks over the summer vacation at “The Cape,” attend family reunions in North Carolina, spend their days over near Chautauqua or down on Keuka Lake. Every weekend throughout the summer there is a festival in some community around Rochester and when we get to the threshold of fall, it seems as if today is a homecoming of sorts. School has begun, First Presbyterian Church returns to two services and some of “summer lost” are in worship and ready to party . . . hence our Deacons have prepared a picnic for us.

How wonderful that the lectionary’s gospel lesson should have these little parables cascading from the mind of Jesus this morning. And yet I struggle a bit to identify with the shepherds.

Most people get attached to their pets. It’s not unreasonable to assume that the shepherd actually cared about the individual animals in his flock. In that case, the shepherd’s searching for the missing sheep was more than just trying to maintain the profitability of his flock. The finding of the lost sheep becomes a source of joy because the flock would otherwise feel incomplete to the shepherd.

So which pet owner of you, having lost your animal companion and then found it again, might not at least call your friends and tell them how happy you are?

Yes, it takes effort to identify *with people who have only a few things*. We have dozens of pens, and if we misplace one, it’s no big deal. We just pick up another one. Even for gadgets where we don’t have extras, it is often easier to simply go buy another than to spend time searching for the wayward one. But that was not so in the first century. People owned far fewer things, and the lost silver coin in the parable was the equivalent of a full day’s pay. 10 coins is something most each new bride received when she was married and losing one of them might actually be more akin to losing your wedding band or engagement ring.

It is almost never easy to identify with God, but that’s whom these two parables really describe. After each of them, Jesus gives the moral of the story, stating that the repentance of a lone sinner is the occasion for great joy in heaven.

Who can say why, after all the members of the human race God has created, God experiences such exhilaration over the conversion of a single individual.

"Which one of you,” said Jesus, “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? 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 sheep that was lost.' 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.”

How beautiful. How touching. And also, how absurd! A much beloved gospel hymn goes like this: “There were ninety and nine who safely lay in the shelter of the fold . . .”

That’s not how Jesus told his parable. "Which one of you,” said Jesus, “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?” He left them where? In the wilderness. For me this added an edge to the story. [[1]](#footnote-1)

A hundred sheep is a good size flock. Surely this shepherd would not miss this one. But he does miss it. That sheep is valuable, so valuable that he will risk leaving his other ninety-nine in the wilderness where they are vulnerable to predators to find this one that has wandered off. So valuable that, when he gets home, “he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'” That is one valuable sheep. But, of course, Jesus is not talking about sheep, at all. He’s talking about you and me. “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.” Where did he leave the ninety and nine? He left them in the wilderness.

**Sheep are not too brightest animals on the planet**. It’s said that sheep get lost by nibbling away at the grass and never looking up. People are like that. Have you ever been nibbling along one day, and all of a sudden you looked up and thought, “How did I get here?”

**And sheep are born followers**. They’ll follow you anywhere.

Mary Alice Dyess of Phoenix, Arizona, wrote to *Guideposts* magazine with a story about her pet lamb, Beatrice. One day, Beatrice broke out of her pen and led the neighbor’s sheep out of their field and toward a busy intersection. Mary Alice called for the sheep, but they continued trotting toward the street. In desperation, she suddenly yelled, “Baaaa!” at the top of her lungs. Beatrice stopped immediately, turned around, and came right back to her own field, with all the neighbor’s sheep trailing meekly behind her.[[2]](#footnote-2)

A new school teacher in a farming community in Texas asked her class, "If there were 12 sheep in a field and one jumped over the fence, how many would be left?"

One little fellow spoke up and said "None."

The teacher said, "You don't know arithmetic."

"No, ma'am,” said the boy, “but I know sheep."

Sheep are followers. And sometimes they are not too wise about whom they choose to follow. This is the portion of the text best set aside for the 2nd Tuesday in November.

Two photos once appeared together on the front page of a local newspaper, the *Camden, Maine Herald.* One photo was of the board of aldermen and the town manager huddled together at a meeting. The other photo was a flock of sheep. Unintentionally, the captions were reversed. Under the picture of the sheep, the caption identified them as the aldermen and town manager. Under the photo of the distinguished fathers of the community, the caption read like this: “The Sheep, naïve and vulnerable, huddle for security against the uncertainties of the outside world.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Let’s face it, friends, you and I are oftentimes like sheep. We nibble ourselves into situations that are too big for us to handle. We follow the other sheep, sometimes unwisely. There we are-- “The Sheep, naïve and vulnerable, huddled for security against the uncertainties of the outside world.” Does our Shepherd care? Yes, says Luke’s gospel. He leaves the ninety and nine. Where? Out in the wilderness, to search for that one who has gone astray. What great good news.

Then I began to read a reflection of editor of Presbyterian Outlook, Jill Duffield. She read the last sentence in an article in the *New York Times* that read, "The world never looks as big as when someone is lost."

This is the last sentence concluded what The Times had to say about Japanese families who continue, five years after the tsunami, to look for loved ones lost in the great wave that overtook the island. They are so desperate to find their lost loved ones that some of them have learned to deep sea dive, repeatedly taking to the ocean to search. Daily, one woman takes food, her missing daughter's favorite meals, and throws them in the sea. "You will do anything for your child," she said.

Years have not eased the urgency of the search. The man who dives in hopes of finding his wife says, "I have no choice but to keep looking."

As we phased out of our summer vacations, articles appeared on Facebook about a GoFundMe site that raised $130,000 to fund the search for two American hikers missing in Pakistan. The site said: “Our friends and the families of Kyle and Scott are working vigorously with local Pakistani heli-porter. Our rescue team at basecamp has attempted to climb the descent route but have been turned back due to weather. They will continue to try with each window of opportunity." If you have followed the news, then you know that the search has been called off.

The world never looks as big as when someone is lost.

Surely you will remember in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, the walls of photos of the missing? All of those heartbreaking posters with photos and messages, phone numbers and descriptions, have been preserved and are kept in loose leaf binders at St. Vincent Hospital. The Daily Kos reported last year, "The binders are in storage, emerging rarely save for one day a year. 'We have a memorial Mass every Sept. 11 in the chapel, and we bring the books there,' Sister Kevin said. 'We let people look through them, and then we take them back' - out of sight but never out of mind."

The world never looks as big as when someone is lost.

In spring of 2001 our son, Josh graduated from college and then spent the summer traveling with friends in Europe. When he returned home it was time to get serious about job hunting. By early September his resume had been sent, phone calls of follow-up completed and job interviews scheduled in New York City. We paid for his round-trip flight from Rochester to New York and put him on a plane. He interviewed on September 10 and telephoned to give us a report of the interviews that had gone reasonably well. During that evening conversation he told us that he would be heading to the World Trade Center to connect with a friend early on the morning of September 11 and then would head to Newark airport for his return flight. We did not know that while taking the subway to the World Trade Center he became so engrossed in a book that he missed his stop just moments before the 1st plane hit the 1st tower. Oblivious to what had just happened, and feeling good about his earlier interviews, he continued on the train, making his way to Newark Airport.

It was from there that he saw the towers fall. In an effort to better manage what was happening authorities had shut down cell phone service. Our church custodian at the time burst into the office announcing that a plane had just hit the world trade center in New York and that this story was all over the news. I was an anxious parent. I did not share with others at the time why I was so concerned. But, we didn’t have a TV at the church and so we managed to untangle a wire coat hanger and jammed it into the back of a VHS tape monitor through which we got a snowy picture. We were all pretty much glued to the reports.

Was Josh in the tower? Had he escaped? We didn’t know. One think I did know was “the world never looks as big as when someone is lost.”

Eventually Josh took all the cash he had on him, about $60, and gave it to a taxi driver with a request to head as far south as the money would take him. They drove to Princeton, NJ where Josh made it to an eating club where he had been a member and called us around 4:00pm to let us know that he was OK. But there are many families of those in the towers, the Pentagon or those flying over Schwenksville, PA be they victims or first responders who did not receive the news that those they loved had been found and that they were alive. They received the news that they had been found by an almighty God who would now keep and preserve them after the actions of those who exercised their freedom to be destructive.

Jesus' parables about a lost sheep and a lost coin are the preface to the story of the lost son that comes directly after. Our reading this morning stops just short of that familiar tale of the prodigal and allows us to linger with the themes of lost and found, doomed and saved, scattered and gathered. Jesus, responding to the criticism of Pharisees who are scandalized by his choice of dinner companions, asks them, "Which among you, doesn't go after the missing sheep? Which among you wouldn't look for your lost money?"

Jesus' parables seem a strange response to their charge that he welcomes sinners. What do lost sheep and lost coins have to do with welcoming sinners? But Jesus is a master of subtle subterfuge, putting people off guard just enough to get their attention.

Science has shown that asking a question invites hearers to engage a more developed part of the brain, moving people from reactivity to reflection. So, perhaps Jesus was inviting some creative thinking on the part of his detractors.

"What would you do if one of your flock went missing? Wouldn't you look for something of material value?"

Maybe we could start with some hypothetical questions, too. We could ask: When have you lost something? What lengths did you go to find it? Ever misplaced your keys? Wallet? Cell phone? Or, how about your wedding ring? A sentimental object or photo?

Now, how much more would you look for a person? Have you ever had the experience of looking around only to notice your toddler is no longer by your side? How frantic was your looking then? How much more would you search for a loved one who'd not returned home from work or school? Or maybe a son gone missing on a mountain? A daughter washed away by a tsunami? A spouse buried under the rubble of a collapsed building?

Jesus is building intensity with this series of stories. He is inviting us to consider how high a price we are willing to pay to rescue the ones we love the most. He is reminding us that we will do anything for our child, that we have no choice but to keep looking, that the world never looks so big as when someone is lost. Sometimes, love can be so intense that we will leave the rest of what is valuable in the wilderness, even prey to the dangers around, to find that which is lost.

Remember, at this point in Luke's narrative, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. These verses need to be read in the context of Luke 9:51, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face toward Jerusalem." The days are drawing nearer with each passing chapter and Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. He will do anything for his child, he has no choice but to keep looking for the lost, the world is never so big as when a people, a creation, a world is lost. His love knows no bounds. His pursuit of grace is relentless. Jesus' desire for reunion is insatiable until the homecoming celebration has been kicked off and all are there rejoicing.

Jesus welcomes tax collectors and sinners because he will do anything to gather in the scattered, to find the lost, to save those in need of rescue. He has set his face toward Jerusalem; no price is too high to pay to restore even just one. Grace is the point of these parables; that's the revelation Jesus wants the Pharisees to see.

If sheep and coins are worthy of seeking out and rejoicing over, then how much more are wayward sons and daughters, tax collectors and sinners?

It is interesting that in Luke Jesus directs these parables to the murmuring Pharisees, but in Matthew the parable of the lost sheep is told to the disciples in the context of instructing them how to live in community with one another. One Gospel has Jesus responding to those out to get him, the other has Jesus teaching those closest to him. The common denominator, however, is sin and Jesus' relentless desire and unquestionable power to overcome the division, isolation, destruction and pain of the separation it causes. He has set his face toward Jerusalem in order to recover the missing, find the lost, save the doomed.

The world is never so big as when someone is lost. Thankfully, Jesus has the whole world in his hands: sheep, coins, prodigal sons, sinners, tax collectors, Pharisees, scribes, you and me. Therefore, we can rejoice.

**Commentary on Luke 15:1-10**

Among her many observations in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard observes that God “churns out the intricate texture of least works that is the world with a spendthrift genius and an extravagance of care.” Perhaps divine genius becomes all the more spendthrift, divine care even more extravagant, as God steadfastly seeks to restore relationships whenever their covenantal texture unravels.

Spendthrift, extravagant ... prodigal.

As they lead up to the parable of the Prodigal Son, the parables of the Found Sheep and Found Coin in Luke 15:1-10 — plus the setting where Jesus tells them — portray Jesus’ understanding of a certain prodigality operating in the way one tenders grace according to the protocol of the reign of God. This is evident in the dynamic of Jesus extending hospitality to sinners, the choice of a shepherd and a housewife as heroes of their respective parables, and the refrain of rejoicing and joy that plays throughout both parables.

One can never overestimate the importance of gospel narratives that place Jesus at a table because whenever Jesus is around food, he is shown serving up lessons about the reign of God. Verses 1-3 introduce two signature teaching methods that Jesus employs to illustrate what God’s reign is like — indiscriminately sharing food and using an occasion of controversy as the starting point for telling parables. The controversy emerges from the Pharisees and scribes’ concern that Jesus openly welcomes sinners to eat together with him. This flies in the face of practices that regulate the purity of table fellowship. To enact such hospitality is to initiate a kind of generosity that, in the minds of Jesus’ critics, is at least wasted on the unrighteous or, even worse, crosses the line into unacceptable religious behavior with sinners. Jesus enacts a gracious hospitality that is prodigal. But his prodigality signals that religious rituals and rules are a waste of time if they do not edify and encourage relationships of care among people.

This prodigality is further underscored as Jesus tells the parables of the Found Sheep and Found Coin (vv. 4-10). Here, Jesus chooses finders who, especially in the eyes of the Pharisees and scribes, would be deemed less than acceptable — indeed, offensive — candidates for admired antagonists. Shepherds and women simply are not hero material according to the religious and social norms of Jesus’ day, particularly to the extent that these two figures function in positions of servitude. And the stakes for outrage over such role models are heightened all the more by the consideration that the heroes of these parables are intended to represent God. To imply, as these parables do, that the shepherd and the woman signify divine grace is an extravagant expectation to place on the comportment of a respectable God. How could God be such a spendthrift with sovereignty? Yet, it is exactly this God who works like a “dirty shepherd” or a “common housewife” that Jesus extols in teaching about the restorative power of the reign of God. What will such gracious solidarity cost the religious authorities — what will it cost us?

The parables of the Found Sheep and Found Coin feature two gracious acts of seeking, finding, and restoring the lost. Both are punctuated by a refrain of human rejoicing and heavenly joy. This refrain is spontaneous and effusive. The shepherd’s act of shouldering the sheep is simultaneously an act of rejoicing (v. 5). The woman’s gathering call for others to rejoice with her is contemporaneous with her finding the coin (v. 9). Each character conveys a sense of immediacy in wanting to rejoice with companions (vv. 6, 9). All of this rejoicing may seem excessive in proportion to the return of just one out of 10, and especially only one out of 100. Yet, heaven and God’s angels joyfully endorse such ample rejoicing when it comes to any lost sinner who repents (vv. 7, 10). Will we join the refrain or grumble along with the religious authorities?

The prodigal beneficence of Jesus’ hospitality toward those considered beyond the pale, the lengths to which God will go to restore lost ones, the rejoicing and joy over lost ones being restored — all of this points to the importance that the gospel lesson places on edifying and encouraging relationships of care among people. Other features of the text reinforce this message in at least two respects. First, particular imagery highlights the commitment of the shepherd and the woman. Kenneth E. Bailey discerns “joy in the burden of restoration” wherein the shepherd “must carry on his shoulder the burden of the lost sheep, a detail specifically mentioned. Without the shouldering of this burden there is no restoration. This task the shepherd accepts with joy” (*Poet and Peasant*, Eerdmans, 1976, 153-154). The action in verse 8 depicts a woman conducting a meticulously thorough search for the coin.

Second, a significant aspect of the text is the presence of Greek words beginning with . Like its English cognate “syn/sym,”  means “same,” “together,” “united,” or “with.” Jesus “eats with” () sinners (v. 2). The shepherd and woman each “call[s] together” () friends and neighbors to tell them, “Rejoice with () me” over finding what was lost (vv. 6, 9). All of this reiterates the passage’s emphasis on accompaniment and community in relationships of care among people.

The religious authorities correctly assess that sinners put such accompaniment and community at risk. Their religious solution is to reject and exclude for protection from sinners. Jesus’ righteous solution is to restore and include for the transformation of sinners.

In setting up the parables, Jesus adroitly faces the religious authorities with the possibility of reassessing their solution by placing them explicitly in the role of the shepherd and implicitly in the role of the woman. “Which one of you ...” is how Jesus presents the situation to the religious authorities as he opens the Found Sheep with a conjectural question. Before we chuckle too heartily over another example of Jesus posing an ethical challenge to his critics, remember that the second person plural of Jesus’ question includes us. What is our solution to sinners in our midst?

1. We’re looking for something and we don’t know what it is, exactly. But we know just enough about it to know that if we are persistent we can find it. Sometimes it’s just a matter of asking the right question to figure out what we want, but it is still a searching for something, some memory that made an impression on us but is now lost.
*The New Yorker* (September 8, 2003) includes a story about writer James Thurber doing a crossword puzzle during a long hospitalization. “What seven-letter word,” he asked his attending nurse, “has three u’s in it?”

“I don’t know,” she replied. Then after a moment’s thought she said, “It must be very unusual.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mary Alice Dyess, “Bringing in the Sheep,” *Guideposts*, May 2000, p.43. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Great Preaching 2001*, edited by Michael Duduit and Jonathan Kever, The Preaching Library, Jackson, TN, 2000, p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)