



Never Lost, Always Found

Luke 15:1-10 (11-32)

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This morning we find ourselves in the lost chapter of the Bible. I just read to you from it, so obviously I don't mean lost like the City of Atlantis or Amelia Earhart's airplane. It's the lost chapter because it's three stories, all distinct and yet all intertwined, of losing something.

We read the first 10 verses, the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. What follows, for the rest of the chapter, is one of the most familiar stories in all of scripture — the story of the prodigal son, or, as I have come to think of it, the story of the lost family.

A quick recap of that story, in case you, like me, appreciate that every so often:

A man has two sons, and the younger son asks for his inheritance early. The father agrees, and the younger son leaves, traveling and living extravagantly and squandering everything he has, everything he's been given. A famine sweeps through the land, and he realizes the only real option, if he is to survive, is to return to his father and beg forgiveness. Then, the story tells us, he sets off, but before he can make it all the way home, his father sees him in the distance, and runs full tilt at his

youngest son, embraces him, kisses him, and calls for a party to celebrate his return.

The older son, the one who stayed behind, who dutifully did the work of two sons all on his own, returns from the fields to discover what all the fuss is about. He is understandably angry, and refuses to join the party. When his father comes and begs him to join in, the older son cuts him off. "You have done nothing for me, despite my loyalty," he says in anger. "And when this irresponsible wayward little boy returns, you pull out all the stops."

The father then says, "Son, you have always been with me. Everything I have is yours. But still we celebrate and rejoice — because your brother was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and now he is found."

And so there you have it. The lost chapter. The shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind and goes out looking for the one that is lost. The woman who sweeps her entire house looking for the one coin that is lost. A lost son who leaves home and a lost son who stays home and a lost father struggling to reunite his broken family.¹

¹ Emmy Kegler, *One Coin Found: How God's Love Stretches to the Margins*, page 1. I am indebted to

Kegler and her book for much of the inspiration behind this sermon.

This chapter of Luke shows us what we already know in our hearts: there's more than one way to be lost. At the start of every new school year, I remember a story I read years ago. Glennon Doyle, an author and activist, relays the story of attempting to help her fifth grade son with his math homework.² The story ends with Glennon being the one to receive after-school tutoring, standing in her son's classroom staring at the chalkboard as his teacher taught her "the new way we do long division," which, Glennon says, "was just fine with [her] since she never really mastered the old way of doing long division."

After the math, though, the two adults sat chatting in child-sized desks. They talked about how some of the most important things that are learned in a classroom have little to do with math or history or spelling. And then the teacher told Glennon about her Friday afternoon practice. Every Friday afternoon, the teacher asks her students to take out a piece of paper and write down the names of four classmates with whom they'd like to sit the following week. Her students know their requests may or may not be honored. She also asks the students to nominate one classmate they believe has been an exemplary citizen during the past week. All papers are submitted individually to her.

And every Friday afternoon, after the students go home, that teacher takes out those pieces of paper, spreads them out in front of her, and studies them. She looks for patterns. Who is not getting requested by anyone? Who doesn't even know who to request? Who never

gets noticed enough to be nominated? Who had a dozen friends last week and none this week?

That teacher...she's not looking for a new seating chart or for exceptional citizens. She's looking for the lonely students. She's searching for the ones who are struggling to connect with others. She's identifying the ones who are falling through the cracks of the class community. She's discovering whose gifts go unnoticed by their peers. She's watching who might be being bullied and who might be doing the bullying.

That teacher...what she's doing is looking for the students who are lost. There's more than one way to be lost. And we almost always need help being found.

Emmy Kegler, in her book *The Lost Coin*, has opened my eyes to dramatically new ways of reading this chapter from Luke's gospel. The standard way of interpreting these stories is to understand ourselves as the wandering sheep, the lost coin, and the foolish younger brother, all lost, and yet all found. But here Kegler points out something I'd never even thought about: yes, sheep wander, and yes, children and siblings make hasty decisions, but coins? "Coins can't get lost by themselves. They can't roll away on their own. Coins get lost because their owners aren't careful; whoever was in charge was wasteful with them. Coins get lost because they lose their shine, because dirt and rust cling to them, and without careful attention, they turn a color indistinguishable from dust and mess."

² This story can be found on Glennon's blog at momastery.com, posted August 14, 2015: "Share This With All the Schools, Please."

In other words, it is not the coin's fault in the slightest that it is lost. And reading one of these stories differently invites us to look at the others differently, too.

As for the lost sheep, yes —the whole herd was endangered while the shepherd left them to chase us down. But... sheep wander. It's in their nature. They were made that way. Most herd animals are. That's why shepherds exist — because sheep are, like the old hymn goes, "prone to wander, prone to leave the one they love." And, as Kegler points out, most of the time, sheep wander for good reasons.

Sheep wander because they're hungry. The field they've been brought to isn't fertile enough, or there isn't enough good water, or enough green grass. It's not about being rebellious or sinful or stubborn. It's about those pangs that hit you in the side when you need more than you are getting. Sheep wander because they are sick, or injured, or older. They are exhausted from the heat or tired from the walk. They drop to the back of the herd, or they lie down just a moment to rest. If the herd moves on without them, they aren't wandering so much as left behind, but still, they find themselves alone.

And sometimes sheep run. Because a hundred sheep are a hundred potential meals for predators that walk upon the very same land. On occasion, a sheep has to flee as fast as their hooves can carry them, and sometimes getting lost is simply the cost of staying alive.

Something of this feels familiar to, doesn't it? We all know something about wandering, don't we? Haven't we all, at one time or another, tried to find "something that will fill us, somewhere safe to rest, or someone to protect us from a world that wants to devour us?"³ As for the prodigal son, Kegler says, "If I am the second son, then I have some questions."⁴

Why, she wonders, does the younger son want to leave? What caused this sort of fracture? Why does the father agree to give him the money? And does the father come to regret that decision? Wish he'd done something differently? She says: "I like the image of the father pacing the edge of his land, wrinkled hand shielding aging eyes, peering off into the distance where he last saw his second son. He didn't go after him, but maybe he never stopped looking for him. Maybe there was transformation for the father, too. Maybe while the son misspent his money, the father was regretting misspending his time. Maybe when the son was starving for food, the father was starving for reconciliation. Maybe, just maybe, if something was wrong enough in the family to make the son leave, there was something right enough in the leaving to make the father change."⁵

Sometimes the responsibility for our getting lost rests squarely on our own shoulders. And sometimes the responsibility for our getting lost is, in part, due to others.

To read this chapter from Luke with its traditional interpretation isn't wrong. It has much to teach us. And to read this chapter with

³ Kegler, page 4.

⁴ Kegler, page 6.

⁵ Kegler, page 8.

Emmy Kegler's insights isn't wrong. It, too, has much to teach us. And here's the thing: the Gospel doesn't ask us to choose one interpretation over the other. The Gospel is, and always has been, multi-layered, rich with meaning, able to speak to us no matter where we are.

There is an ancient story, claimed by many different traditions, about blind men and an elephant. One of the most famous versions is found in a poem by John Godfrey Saxe.⁶ In his version, six blind men, all unfamiliar with what an elephant is, are asked to touch one and describe it. The first man reaches out and touches the elephant's side, and proclaimed that elephants are like walls. The second man does the same, but when he reaches out, he touches a tusk. Elephants, he says, are like spears. The third man touches the elephant's leg, and compares it to a tree. The fourth reaches for the elephant's tail, and describes it as a rope. And so on.

Here's the thing. Each person in this poem is right. Each person is absolutely right based upon where they are standing. Based upon their location, in this exercise and in life. And they are even more right when they put it all together.

There's more than one way to be lost. Maybe it's the result of your own mistakes. Maybe it's the result of the mistakes of others. Maybe you've wandered. Maybe you've been misplaced. Maybe you've discovered you are far away from home and hungry for food and so much more.

No matter what the circumstance, no matter what your story, the ending is always the same. The sheep is found, and the shepherd calls to all those around, rejoice with me! The coin is found, and the woman calls to all those around, rejoice with me! The family is found, and the father calls to all those around, rejoice with me!

No matter what, no matter how you are lost: You will be found. You are being found, right now. You are never outside the reach of God's love. And if we listen, we can hear the voice of God calling out not only to us, but to all those around us: Rejoice with me! Rejoice!

⁶ "The Blind Men and the Elephant"