

Still Restoring the Beloved Lost 2022  
 Matthew 18:1-5, 12-14 Luke 15:1-10

### Matthew 18:1-5, 12-14 (New Revised Standard Version)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

### Luke 15:1-10 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, 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. “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

So as a professor or a teacher, if one of your students  
 was somewhat disruptive and doing poorly in your class,  
 wouldn't you immediately cancel all your appointments and plans,  
 search diligently until you found that failing student,  
 and then spend every evening until late at night  
 patiently going over the class material with them  
 so that they got it and earned an “A” on the exam?

And then when your recalcitrant student earned that “A”,  
 you'd gather your friends and colleagues, saying to them,  
 “come to a party and celebrate with me,  
 for my worst student has now earned the highest grade in the class.”

Yes, that's exactly what you would do ... or maybe not.

What teacher or professor would **not** do that?

Well probably, none of us would do all that ...

... it's ridiculous to even think of doing such a thing.

### **Yet that is precisely the picture of God that Jesus portrays.**

The point is not so much, this is what you or I would probably do,

as it is, this is what God is like, and what grace is like,

and describes how God loves and operates in the world.

**That is the true nature of God's endless grace and second chances,**  
like the good shepherd or the woman of the parables in Luke 15.  
They each keep on searching and searching  
until what's lost has been found and restored,  
then call on friends and neighbors to rejoice with them.

This is our God, who really loves us and cares about us that much,  
and seeks to rescue those who mess up their lives,  
or who suffer in anguish from dreadful decisions,  
and who can't put life back together on their own.

When the Israelites were first entering into the Promised Land,  
God warned them not to copy their pagan Canaanite neighbors,  
and not to join in worshiping false gods of other nations.  
From that stream, a tradition developed to avoid a fall into sin  
by standing apart from the enticing corruption and sin of culture.

But it devolved into a flawed **theology of separation and exclusion...**  
that assumed that all of the temptation and sin was **out there**,  
and defined holiness & faithfulness as being separate & distinct.

Centuries later, by the time of Jesus,  
it distorted further into a harsh form of **judgment and legalism...**  
... placing compliance to ritual & tradition over mercy toward others.

**More than seeking a meaningful and authentic relationship with God,**  
their religion became all about scrupulously avoiding  
even the possibility of outside contamination or corruption,  
**by rejecting some people as hopeless rejects, as**  
**unworthy sinners lost way beyond the mercy of God.**

The religious authorities assumed that certain people  
are clearly more loved and acceptable to God than others, vs. 1-3  
Now all the tax collectors and sinners were **coming near to listen** to him (Jesus). And the Pharisees  
and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

In answer to the scribes and Pharisees objection,  
Jesus will use parallel parables to clarify and describe...  
... the true nature and depth of God's gracious and seeking love,  
as a picture of grace - **endless second chances & possibilities**  
that will never give up on us, ever abandon us or walk away...  
**...God's gracious mercy that always seeks out the lost and struggling.**

All through the Old Testament,  
kings and religious leaders are often identified as shepherds,  
called and responsible to lead and care for God's people,  
but they were not always faithful, obedient and diligent.

As we read in Ezekiel 34:2-3, 5  
Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not  
shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you  
do not feed the sheep. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food  
for all the wild animals.

Continuing in Jeremiah 23:1-2

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord.

Isn't it ironic that the scribes & Pharisees are complaining & upset that Jesus is doing what they were supposed to be doing all along.

Looking deeper into the text, I wonder, **who am I in this passage?**

Am I like that careless shepherd who's let the sheep scatter?

Am I ever similar to the scribes and Pharisees, with a harshly critical and judgmental cold heart and attitude against those in need, those who struggle, or in pain or wander?

There have been times when I've been a lost sheep who's gone astray.

**Have you ever really been lost?**

as a child, ever look up in a crowd, and not see your parents?

Do you remember feeling panic and fear, did you cry?

as a youngster, did you ever get lost in the wilderness, or in a store and have no idea of which direction to go?

We can be lost in lots of other ways ----

- lost-ness of broken relationships, or loss of vigor & health
- the lost, of having no direction, no joy or delight in life
- the lost-ness of not feeling loved, useful or needed, or having no sense of being wanted, or special to anyone
- the lost-ness of having failed miserably, caused harm, or feeling beaten, unacceptable, ashamed or worthless.

Lost is to feel overwhelmed when hope's candle seems to flicker, and we realize that we cannot fix it our self or make it right on our own.

You can be lost in the wilderness like the strayed missing sheep.

We can be lost among others who don't even know that we're gone.

**Our hope is the truth that God is always still searching for us,**

however we are wounded, wherever we are, whatever we have done,

God still looks for us and will welcome us home with rejoicing.

**Yes, at times I have been that lost sheep who's gone astray.**

At other times I have been like the shepherd searching for the lost.

When Jesus told this parable,

the people in the crowd were familiar with sheep and shepherds.

They knew that when a sheep wanders off from the flock

and finds itself lost and alone in the wilderness,

that it will lie down and bleat in paralyzed terror.

So when the shepherd does find it, the traumatized sheep can't walk, and has to be picked-up & carried. That lost sheep is a heavy burden.

It's also worth noting the good shepherd seeks and searches for it,

**even though it's entirely the sheep's fault for wandering off.**

And there is no evidence of repentance on the part of the sheep  
yet the shepherd searches to find the lost and strayed one.

**Here, repentance is nothing more than letting oneself be found.**

These details are intended to help **illustrate God's grace and mercy,**  
**details that teach and remind us that our rescue and salvation**  
**are entirely the gracious work of the Good & true Shepherd.**

At other times, I have been more like the friends and neighbors  
who have been invited to celebrate the restoration of the lost...

... in contrast to the scribes & Pharisees who refused to participate.

Once the shepherd has found and rescued the sheep,  
notice that the neighbors all gather in joyful celebration,  
for the shepherd has found that which was lost. vs. 7

**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.**

The pattern of searching for what was lost & rejoicing that it's found  
describes God's desire & purpose, to restore the lost and broken,  
**and that also describes the task and ministry of the Church,**  
**to continually & joyfully proclaim hope & God's gracious love.**

In the Luke 15 passage we also see that in a very unusual move  
within the highly patriarchal context of the Middle East, ...

**... in that Jesus teaches a parallel lesson,**  
**in which God is represented by a woman who searches for a lost coin.**

In the parable, a peasant woman has lost a coin.

After lighting a lamp she sweeps through the house,  
she searches until the lost coin has been found,  
and then she celebrates with family and friends.

**That's the same pattern as before,**  
**searching for what was lost and rejoicing once it's found,**  
**again, expressing God's desire to restore the lost and strayed.**

This pair of matched companion parables are told in response  
to the religious leaders' grumbling complaints against Jesus,  
that he allows and welcomes sinners, misfits and outcasts,  
the people that they judge & reject as the unworthy-lost.

Both parables in Luke demonstrate the extravagance of God's grace,  
in whatever way we are experiencing lost, struggling or defeated,  
God is still searching for us, seeking for us, until we are found.

**That's all very good news for the sinner, the lost & the undeserving.**  
And then we are all called and invited to join in  
to rejoice & celebrate restoration of the lost and wounded...  
... in sharp contrast to the Pharisees' and scribes' behavior.

I'm sure you noticed that the shepherd and the lost sheep parable  
is the same story told in both Luke and Matthew,

but each from different perspective and context.

In Matthew,  
the disciples were concerned about their own status and authority,  
arguing over who would rule over whom in the coming Kingdom of God.

To illustrate that God's kingdom is not about status-seeking,

Jesus sets a young child before them to make that point, vs. 1-4

... the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, **unless you change** and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. **Whoever becomes humble like this child** is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

In that culture, of course they loved their children,  
but children had no status and were totally powerless.

They had no authority, but were entirely dependent,  
and seen as insignificant and of little consequence.

In Matthew, Jesus calls for **the Church** to seek the lost vs. 5, 14

**Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.** ... it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

Through these parables and by the example of his own life,

Jesus is inviting the whole community of faith, **the Church**,  
to share in the relentless search for the lost and strayed,  
and in the joy of heaven when they are found and restored.

**That is the true Gospel message of God's grace and compassion,  
that the Church is called and equipped to live out and proclaim.**

The Church as a bright light shining in a sin & shame darkened world,  
as God's grace brings hope and love to the lost, guilty and broken...

**... but somehow, sometimes the Church can become distracted,  
and sometimes, somehow the Church can slip off-message.**

I don't know of a time in history, certainly not in my lifetime  
when we have seen our world and culture more broken and lost,  
more polarized, antagonistic, hurting and distrustful.

**But the unfailing promise of God's gracious mercy is still our hope,  
and the Church of Jesus Christ has got to get on-message,  
and we've got to focus on proclaiming the Gospel Good News.**

**What matters in this world is God's radical eagerness to forgive –  
and that without any limit or boundaries our God seeks the lost,**

**and that** forbearance and compassion are **very nature of God,  
which is to flow freely** through us toward other sinners,  
**for that Gospel truth is why** Jesus came, died and rose again,  
and calls the Church to proclaim, to live out and make known.

These days, when I read or watch the news, I wonder with Psalm 8:4,

**What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?**

Grace is the only answer as the prophet Nehemiah announces, vs. 9:17

You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and **abounding in steadfast love**, and **you do not forsake us**.

We can count on, trust and rely on God's grace & mercy without limit.

**We're called to respond to that Good News & compassion  
by letting that gracious love flow freely through us...**

... **as we are called** to join in the grand heavenly celebration, vs. 7, 10

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.