

9.14.2025 Pentecost 14

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

“Jesus welcomes you”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today’s parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin are about the God who doesn’t give up on people. Like a shepherd searching for a lost sheep or a woman sweeping her home for a lost coin, God searches for us with love and forgiveness.

Jesus told these two parables because of the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes who said, “*These fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*” Perhaps the Pharisees and scribes were angry that Jesus didn’t eat with them, but instead made companions of the sinful, the outcast, and the lost.

The word “companion” comes from *companis*, in Latin, and literally means “together in bread” A companion is someone we share our bread with. This helps us understand Jesus’ last supper when he shared bread in a new way, making all who seek him in his holy supper his companions – people together in bread with him. Jesus is the companion of the lost. Jesus is our friend.

Who among us hasn’t been lost at some point in their lives? If you were to say, “I’ve never been lost – I’ve always been one of the righteous,” hang on, I’ll get to you in a few minutes. As people, it’s not unusual to lose our way – in fact we might say that losing our way is often how we eventually find our way – or find the path we are meant to be on. Instead of saying, “I’ve lost my way,” at some point we might say, “I’ve been drifting through in life – as if I’m moving away from where I was or would like to be.” Such drifting or lostness can certainly happen at certain points in life – in a move to a new job, city or country; a mid-life career change; struggles with illness or addiction; or aging in a society that worships youth and beauty – these can all make us feel lost.

The lost sheep is us – humanity. Like a sheep nibbling on one tuft of grass and then another and another we can become lost, and at some point, we lift our heads, turn, and can’t see the flock or the shepherd anymore. Living in a modern urban environment makes it easy to feel lost. The modern world reduces people to numbers. We commute on well-traveled roads with strangers, their cars bearing anonymous numbers. For years, I commuted by train in Tokyo with anonymous fellow travelers through Shinjuku Station where 3.5 million people pass each day. We live in communities but often don’t really know our neighbors. Capitalist and Marxist economies both reduce human beings to *homo-economicus* or people who are valued only for what they produce or how much they are worth. In times of war politicians talk of “collateral damage,” not addressing the real human damage – the number of people lost, missing, or displaced by war.

The modern world is filled with lost people. Jesus’ parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin are, of course, about us. We are the lost and he is the Good Shepherd who seeks us out to heal, feed, and forgive. In the parable of the lost coin, that little silver coin was called a *drachma*, a coin with only a modest face value, yet to the woman in the parable it represented the margin between

survival and complete poverty. She 10 had *drachma* and lost 10 percent of this – one coin. The point of the parable is, of course, that Jesus searches out even the insignificant, the poor and those in whom the world sees little value. All of us can be that insignificant coin at some point in life.

In both these parables, Jesus is speaking of the inherent worth of the individual – that every person is precious in God’s sight. Each of us are created and loved by God. Each of us has a unique voice, personality, gifts, and thoughts. These parables highlight God’s love for every person – that no one is irredeemable.

A few minutes ago, I said I would talk to those who might say, “I’ve never been lost – I’ve always been one of the righteous.” Jesus told these parables because of the grumbling of self-righteous religious people. The trouble with self-declared righteous people is that they are perhaps the most lost of all people. You see, like the Pharisees and scribes, self-righteous religious people don’t see their own need for God’s grace and forgiveness. With smug feelings of superiority, they pompously lord over the sinful and the outcast. Self-righteous religious people don’t see their own need of God’s mercy and love!

Over the years I’ve encountered such people in the church who grumble and complain about letting sinners into the church! It’s hard to believe but true. How ironic, because Jesus himself says, “*I have not come to call the righteous but the sinner*” (Lk. 5:32). Jesus is talking about all of us. We have all been lost, and at times – if we are honest – all of us have also been the grumbling Pharisee. We are all in need of forgiveness. Even today I hear the grumbling when Jesus opens the doors of a large, beautiful church on a well-traveled downtown street, welcoming all those we would rather not see. Like Pharisees and scribes, we can also be lost in our legalism and rules, rather than being found in loving God and loving our neighbor in need.

Today’s reading from 1 Timothy gives us an up-close and personal snapshot of a Pharisee. Paul himself was a Pharisee who had lived by the law, persecuting all who deviated from it. Looking back, Paul calls himself “*a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.*” In 1 Corinthians 15:9, Paul says it this way: “*For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.*”

We all know the story of Paul and his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus – of how the risen Jesus searched out Paul in his lostness to save him. Paul described this saying, “*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost.*” For Paul, the grace and love of Jesus Christ alone changed him. It is not our righteous following of the law – because all of us fail in following the law – rather, it is only the love and mercy of God’s grace that searches us out, recreating us and giving us a new start.

The moral of the story is that if the grace of God could save someone like Paul, then there’s hope for humanity. The gospel is not a rigid theology nor is it a new legalism – it is the good news that

Jesus Christ is alive and loves you. Nearly 500 years ago, Martin Luther wrote in a Christmas sermon, the following words,

Of what benefit is it to your neighbor if you build a church entirely out of gold?...Do you think that God wants to be served with such fancy things? God has commanded none of these, but only that if you see your neighbor...in sin or in suffering in body and soul, you are to leave everything else and at once help your neighbor in every way within your power, and if you can do no more, help your neighbor with words of comfort and prayer. Thus, Christ has done for you, giving you an example to follow.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to live as Jesus to your neighbor. He is the Good Shepherd alive in you. He lives to search out, help, and welcome the lost, the suffering, and the hungry through you. We live in the wealthiest and most powerful nation on the planet and yet, very often, we do not help the lost and the suffering. Like Pharisees, we grumble about those who are the modern-day poor, the outcast, the foreigner, the LGBTQ, the hungry, and others as if they are a nuisance and we are better than them, and better off without them. In doing so, we forget the forgiveness of Jesus. Jesus has welcomed you so that you might search out, walk alongside of, forgive, and share your bread with others. Jesus is your companion so that you might be a companion – a sharer of bread – with others.

Jesus' love and grace have brought you here today. He has searched you out, welcoming you with forgiveness so that you might search out, befriend, and welcome others.

Rejoice that Jesus is your companion and welcome those in need of his help.

Follow Jesus. Imitate him. Help and welcome your neighbor as Christ has done for you.

Amen.