

Texts: Psalm 119:167-176; Luke 15:1-32

Subject: Lost sheep, coin, son

Theme: Always Being Found

Third Sunday in Lent, Mar. 7, 2021; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

A lost sheep. A lost coin. A lost son. These well told stories have been preached on and written about for many centuries. There are probably hundreds of books you might read to dive into these stories again and again, but one book I read a couple of years back is so heartfelt and moving that I'd love to just commend it to you and go sit down; but I won't. You may however, check out *One Coin Found*, by Pastor Emmy Kegler.¹ She leads Grace Lutheran Church in NE Minneapolis. "Nothing is lost in the eyes of God," my mother says to me. When we lose our keys, or a phone, or the remote, one of the superstitions in our house has been to tie a dish rag around a table leg. When the towel falls, the item will be found. Does it work every time? Nope. But maybe it distracts me from the stress and obsession of not being able to find the thing. When a beloved toy goes missing, the kids will turn over every box and basket to find it. When mom lost her headphones, we made it a contest to see who could find the tiny earbud. The winner would get an unspecified prize for finding it. Elise found the tiny earbud it shoved inside the office printer, and her reward was a special trip to the candy store. A trip I know she will not soon forget.

I lose things all the time. When we were in seminary we moved 5 times. From Las Vegas to Dubuque, Dubuque to Florida for a summer, then back to Dubuque, then to Iowa City, then back again, then home again to Las Vegas. Things were broken or lost

¹ Kegler, Emmy. *One Coin Found*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019)

along the way. There was always a moment after a move - you probably know this feeling - when you're looking for a thing, and you know it's in a box, somewhere, but you've lost the energy to go searching for it - and you know it will turn up eventually, so you just give up looking. Moving to a new place is difficult. It's stressful, frustrating, maybe liberating at the same time - to embrace change and to be able to let some things go. Other times it hurts. When we lose precious and meaningful items, even more when we lose ones we love.

It's been a year since most of us have been together physically as a church. This is a cause for rejoicing! While we are still limiting contact, and social distancing, but we can begin to see ways to celebrate and so many reasons to do so. And at the same time, as we reflect on what we've been through in the past year, we can see that there is loss. Over 3900 deaths just here in Clark county. While businesses are beginning to come back, so many have lost their livelihood - their work is gone or has changed dramatically and permanently. Some have lost income and have been unable to provide, unable to pay bills, and unable to find ways to make up for the loss. We've even lost people. Some moved away. Some are estranged over political arguments, still staying away from gatherings due to health concerns, or have just grown apart due to the overwhelming stress of the year that has passed. Some churches have permanently closed - we have guests with us today who were members of churches that no longer remain. We pray you will find this community to be a welcoming home. And even as we gather here to worship, we remember some of the dear saints of this church that we've lost to illness or age, and we feel that loss deeply.

Sometimes things get lost. Sometimes even people get lost. When that happens, we feel less than whole. Our families, our communities, and our world are less than whole when some of the pieces, some of the parts, some of the persons get lost. God rejoices in making us whole again. In Christ, we are one family, one community, one church, one world. Jesus is a finder. He is longing for us to come home to Him and to one another as well. In Jesus we are always being found.

Jesus tells these three parables in response to criticism - the grumbling - from some of the Pharisees. There's always some grumbling going on. And most of the time, we tend to think of the Pharisees and scribes as villains - they're out to get Jesus - but that's not really the case there. In a way, they're right. They're the religious leaders - Paul was one of them. They know the law, and it's their job to keep it and interpret it for people. Hanging around with sinners and tax collectors was dangerous. You probably wouldn't want your Pastor around them all the time. But of course Jesus was there for a reason.

He's been preaching repentance: turn around, turn from your obsession of the law, turn from your lawlessness and selfishness to the goodness and grace of the Savior, and rejoice in the kingdom of God that is all around us. The people want to know what repentance looks like.

There's a sheep that wanders off. Now, we might think that 99 are better than one, so let that little sheep go. But the flock is not whole. Sheep wander. That's what they do. They live in the desert, and the food is hard to find, maybe this little sheep has to compete with the older siblings to find a good patch of grass to eat, so it wanders off a bit and can't find the way back. A sheep needs a shepherd to go looking. It would be a

useless shepherd that didn't chase down those lost ones and fight off the creatures looking for a stray to be their supper. So 99 get left behind - just for a bit, while a courageous and reliable shepherd gives the lost one the attention it needs. Then when the mission is complete, invite friends and neighbors to spend time together, to celebrate the avoided tragedy, and mark the occasion with a party.

There's a coin that gets lost. It probably didn't roll away on its own, but was dropped, brushed off a table, or misplaced through some neglect or oversight. Maybe it fell down and got a bit dirty, and blended in with a dark floorboard. Over time, it might have been buried in some dust, or wedged in a corner out of sight. A coin has no agency - it can't roll its way back into a change purse. It needs light, a good sweeping and good eyes to find it in its hiding place. With attention to detail it gets uncovered and discovered, and she calls her friends to come and celebrate with her. This lost coin, this one day's wages will allow her to survive, and live in safety.

There's a younger son who wants to go far away. We don't know why. In her book, Rev. Emmy Kegler wonders where the mother is, who might grab this father and son by the ear to work out whatever issue has caused a division between them. he asks for his share of the inheritance, the father gives it, and the son quickly "squandered his property in dissolute living." There was a famine, and no one helped him. He was afraid, but decided to go home and fall at his father's feet for mercy. Before he could get a word out, the father ran to him, and welcomed him home, not to make him a servant but reminding him of his true identity as an honored and beloved member fo the family. His older brother however, was lost out in the field. When the celebration began, he couldn't bring himself to go in, to rejoice for the reunification and reconciliation that was taking

place. He could only see what was right in front of him. The father even went out looking for him and was pleading for him to come into the party as well, but he would not rejoice.

What does repentance look like? Jesus seems to say that it looks like being claimed, being cleaned, and being found by the one who seeks you out.

Jesus is the one who reaches out and touches the casket when someone dies, he talks with foreign women in the mid-afternoon, he kisses wounds and diseased skin. He doesn't become unclean. He doesn't get scandalized. He doesn't catch the disease. He is the one bringing life, healing, and wholeness, finding lost people where they are, bringing them back into community to be safe, to be welcomed, to be loved. Not everyone will understand it - not then and not now. The Pharisees have their way of keeping the law, but it's Jesus that fulfills it. He goes to the margins to find the ones who have wandered, rolled away, or left home. Not with a shepherd's staff but by the Word. He fends off every enemy. Not with a broom, but with a cross made from wood he lifts us up with Him. Not with a robe and a ring, but with a resurrection like his, he brings us back into the family. Jesus Christ shows up for us all and seeks out the ones who are most in need.

Sometimes it takes being lost to know where you belong.

And. There. Is. Rejoicing.

These are more than three stories of lost animals, objects, and persons - today we've heard three stories of joy: rejoicing, celebrating, feasting. Today we are rejoicing that we are together - in person and online. And we know we will soon be all together here, and we are rejoicing to hear this good news that in Christ we are always together,

always being found, always whole, always together at the table for a feast. God's great joy is to find us, claim us, carry us, and hold us. There is rejoicing in heaven, among God and all the angels when the ones who need this word of grace and mercy find it. There is joy in the community when we get to gather and hear about the love we are welcomed into, despite our differences, and dysfunction. There is rejoicing in the body of Christ when we receive in faith all of God's promises and hear how we have a God who is always looking out for us, always looking for us, and always looking to welcome us back into his loving arms.

Amen.