

Lost
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
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Luke 15:1-10

Have you ever been lost? Of course you have.

The question today is, have you ever been found? Let me leave that question hanging here in the air and share with you a quick story from the file labeled "*Stupid Things Jenn Did as a Child.*"

I think I was about ten or eleven years old when we drove across country on a family vacation to Kansas City, Missouri. At that age, it won't surprise you to hear that I was deep into a maddening love of all things having to do with horses. I read books about horses, played with a set of plastic horses, drew cartoons about horses and even took riding lessons (as long as my grades were decent).

And now, my family was going to spend time in a part of the country where there were lots of horses! Just in case, I snuck my riding helmet into the trunk of our car before we set out.

One night we made a pit stop at a diner. I guess the stash of sandwiches my mom made were running low. Next to the diner was a large fenced in field, with some big farm animals at the far end.

Towards the end of the meal, my parents were antsy about getting back on the road. They were probably focused on keeping my hyperactive 7 year brother occupied. I think that's how I was able to excuse myself from the table and slip out the back door toward the pasture. Looking over my shoulder, I could tell that my parents didn't even notice I was gone. I ran up to the pasture and jumped the fence, which was no small feat for a child, and walked to the other side to take a look at what I assumed to be horses from a distance.

Imagine my surprise when the largest one turned toward me, snorted loudly and slowly started to come my way. This was no horse, it was a buffalo! Soon I was smack dab in the middle of half a dozen snorting, hairy, gargantuan beasts. I held out my hand, but they stomped their feet and stared me down, ready to charge.

Unbeknownst to me, my father had looked out the diner window at just the right moment and saw what was happening. He came flying to my aid, red-faced, eyes wide, yelling my name. He grabbed me by the back of my belt and screamed "run!!!!". We got out of there as quick as we could, and hopped back over the fence just a moment before being trampled.

I had never seen my dad so upset before.

Where were you...Didn't you say you were going to the bathroom...You scared me half to...

His reaction was just this side of terrifying. But then his hand touched my arm, and everything changed.

Fellow parents out there, you'll identify with what happened next. When he touched arm, it was as if he needed to feel like I was really, truly there, that I wasn't merely a shadow he had been chasing through the field for the last heart-pounding moments.

And with that touch came relief. And with relief came joy. And with joy came an embrace brimming with all the unspoken love of a parent for a child. I was still in trouble, believe you me. But above and beyond all that, I was found.

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?

Nobody. No one does this. No one would ever do that.

It's insanity. If you lose 1% of your wealth (which is all that sheep is to a shepherd, really), you don't risk losing the 99% of your wealth to get it back. By leaving the 99, you risk them roaming off, being stolen, or being killed and eaten by a wolf.

No one leaves the 99.

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.'

Nobody. No one does this.

You don't call friends and neighbors together for a celebration only to spend more money feeding and entertaining them. I mean why bother looking for the coin at all, if you're just going to blow more money anyway?

It's insanity. Nobody does this. Except Jesus.

Jesus does this. Jesus leaves the 99 to search for the lost. Jesus sweeps the house and then throws a party when the lost are found. It's totally and thoroughly insane. And, that's why the Gospel is such Good News.

When a soul is lost, it is missed, longed after, and not only worth the search party, but worth the celebration-party when brought back into the fold.

And, of course, this story cuts two ways. When I hear these parables, I can't help reading myself into the story as the sheep, as the coin. The lost one. The intransigent sheep. The coin that slipped out of the pocket and into the pillowy cushions of the couch.

But, this story was told to a group of highly religious people who fancied themselves as the 99 sheep—the nine coins that were never lost. They are the perfect ones that would never (ever) run off, who would never (ever) slip under the passenger seat into the carpeted well which never fails to collect all manner of things. They would never be so stupid as to enter a buffalo enclosure because they thought they were horses.

These guys aren't impressed at a God who spends all His time going after the lost ones, when God should be spending His time with the well-behaved ones who seemingly never left his side.

But, if they are scandalized, oh well. If they wouldn't leave the 99, or throw a two-coin party after a one-coin find—oh well.

That is the Good News. Our God is the one who celebrates when the lost are found. This is something for us to celebrate. Something for us to be excited about. Something for us to get others excited about.

The church isn't just for the self-proclaimed self-righteous, not way back when and not now. No, the followers of Jesus are the ones who follow Jesus. And not just to the cross. But to the field and the valley and the mountains, looking through the scrub for a well-loved and well-lost sheep.

We're the ones who are to be about pulling the world's refrigerator out from the wall to find the long-lost treasures underneath that are so, so precious to God. Because nobody does that. Except Jesus, of course, and we who follow him. Amen.