Luke 15:1-10: **The Woman Who Lost Her Coin**
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Listen with me for God's word to us today through these words from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15 (CEB).

> All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."
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> Jesus told them this parable:
> "Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn't he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost sheep.' In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.
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> "Or what woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won't light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life."

Shrek was a Merino sheep, one of thousands living on a huge ranch in New Zealand. Each year at shearing time, the owners round up all the sheep and give them a haircut. One year they noticed that Shrek was missing. Was he killed by a wild predator? Did he injure himself? Had he staged a jailbreak and left the ranch? No one knew, and for the next *six years* Shrek was lost. But the ranch hands kept looking for him.

In the spring of 2004, somebody finally found Shrek. By this time he had grown a giant ball of fleece that covered his eyes and hid his legs. The ranchers discovered that Shrek had been taking shelter in a cave. Maybe he was a loner. Maybe he was intentionally avoiding being sheared. Maybe he liked having long hair, or maybe he just didn't want intrusions on his freedom. Maybe he didn't mean to get lost at all.

When Shrek came home and his giant coat was finally shorn (which became a televised national event in New Zealand), it turned out he had grown 60 pounds of wool — enough to make 20 suits. His owners enjoyed the publicity and they threw a party to celebrate Shrek's return. He even traveled to parliament and met the prime minister. Shrek continued to live a happy life after that, and he died of old age at 16 years.[1]

Like Shrek's owners, the shepherd in Jesus' sheep story *noticed* when just one sheep was missing out of the many in the flock. In fact that shepherd abandons the other 99 sheep to go seek out the lost one. You see, when one sheep is lost, the flock is incomplete. Amy Jill Levine is a New Testament scholar who also happens to be Jewish. Writing about this story, she emphasizes how the shepherd gathers the whole neighborhood to celebrate when he finds the lost sheep:

> If this fellow can experience such joy in finding one of a hundred sheep, what joy do we experience when we find what we have lost? More, if he can realize that one of his hundred has gone missing, do we know what or whom we have lost? When was the last

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shrek_(sheep)

> time we took stock, or counted up who was present rather than simply counted on their presence? Will we take responsibility for the losing, and what effort will we make to find it — or him or her [or them] — again?[2]

Wow. Her questions go to work on me. Hundreds of people are connected to this faith community, but who's *not* present here? Whom have we overlooked or simply counted on without checking in? And do we throw a celebration whenever someone who's been lost or absent is once again found and present?

The second parable from Jesus that we heard today stars a woman who loses a silver coin. It's worth about one day's wages, and it represents a tenth of her whole savings. Like anyone hunting for work, bankrupted by life, or living meal to meal, this woman feels a pressing need to recover her lost money. It's necessary for living. She vigorously turns the house upside down, shining light into every crevice, until she finds that coin. She's so relieved and joyful at its return that she too throws a party, invites her friends and neighbors to celebrate her good news with her.

When Jesus told a story about a lost sheep, he wasn't angling for cute publicity, or offering the tale to amuse people on the Internet. Jesus told *his* sheep story to a bunch of religious leaders who were growling about whom Jesus ate with. Jesus wasn't following the rules. Those grumbling clergy thought they were the ones doing spiritual life right, and accordingly earning God's approval. Maybe they even felt Jesus' welcome of "sinners" was dangerous and outside of the bounds of what God intended.

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[2] Levine, Amy Jill. *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. New York: HarperCollins, 2014. p. 41.

In response, Jesus tells these two parables about someone seeking something lost, but each time it is something that *belonged to the searcher from the start*. The shepherd who lost his sheep represents God. The woman who lost her coin represents God. God seeks what is already God's own, which means that nothing can be so lost as to erase its original identity as God's own creature. The lost sheep and the lost coin aren't the heroes of the stories because neither a sheep nor a coin can repent! Well, possibly a sheep could muster a form of…sheepishness ☺…but the point is that the sheep and the coin do not change their lives before they get found. Each is sought out by its owner and brought back without the lost one doing anything. Which means, says one Bible scholar, that these parables aim

> not at calling the 'sinners' to repentance but at calling the 'righteous' to join the celebration. Whether one will join the celebration is all-important because it reveals whether one's relationships are based on merit or mercy. Those who find God's mercy offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents. Thus they exclude *themselves* from God's grace.[3]

Whom or what have I lost? Whom or what have you lost? Among other things, how about our human empathy and kindness and mercy, traits so rapidly and easily lost when we start fearing people who are different from us? We witnessed again this week the corrosive rhetoric and the deadly political violence splintering our public life. Theologian Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty wrote in response,

> I believe that we have to allow experiences of violence, discrimination, conflict, hatred, and retaliation to shape us, but only to the extent that these experiences enable us to articulate faithfully God's mission of reconciliation. [Elizabeth says she challenges herself] to engage in conversations across the artificial yet tangible lines that divide us by race, class, political party, gender, sexuality, religious belief, and more. Reconciliation requires conflict transformation.[4]

And transforming conflict is hard, holy work. Just opening a conversation across dividing lines might be a start. Willing ourselves not to dehumanize even our adversaries is necessary for living on a finite planet. Praying for God's help, we can seek out and rediscover our own deep wells of compassion, celebrating those as gifts and signs of God's own Spirit.

Whether that, or something else, feels like your challenge, what personal truthtelling, what searching, what life changes, and finally what celebrating might each of us be called to as we, like God, seek vigorously what has been lost?

Aircraft exploding.
Evaporated buildings.
2977 lives.
Village upon village, city upon city in Afghanistan. Iraq. Syria.
So much loss.
This week marked the 24th anniversary of 9/11. Just five years after the 9/11 attacks, minister and poet Pat Conover wrote these words about the loss of American naïveté:

> Now we are a little more like others,
> Who live with fear as daily bread,
> A little more like others,
> Who fear that we will make them dead.[5]

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[3] Culpepper, R. Alan. "Luke." *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX. p. 298. My emphasis.
[4] https://elizabethhinsonhasty.com/2025/09/13/navigating-white-water-ethical-rapids/
[5] http://www.patconover.com/christian/NineEleven.html

All these years later, who might still feel lost? Families of 9/11 victims. First responders dying early of lung disease and cancer. Flight instructors and visa-granters who still live with guilt. People who succumb to extremist rhetoric. Looking back, it's not hard to picture both the 9/11 terrorists, and many of our own leaders who reacted, as lost souls, each desperately wielding power as a last-ditch way of trying to change the world, and all in need of resurrecting love. We who live in this country may feel the ethical lostness of being attacked and then becoming attackers. That's a dilemma also modeled in the Middle East and in nearly every conflict around the globe.

Yet today's parables proclaim that God ceaselessly seeks out whatever and whomever is lost — victims, perpetrators, helpers, and bystanders. Imagine the divine celebration when Jesus brings each one of them home, calls all the neighbors, and throws a fiesta! So let's pray toward that great party, toward the day when God's redemptive power will transform hearts and restore the fortunes of *all* God's people: Gazan refugees, brave first responders, ISIS draftees, Afghan peasants, drug cartel agents and addiction sufferers, all prisoners and guards, everyone in North Korea, Congolese farmers and the warlords who torment them, minorities and majorities in all the ways we divide ourselves, every lost sheep, even all the politicians, and even us — Jesus reveals that God is aiming to redeem the whole shebang.

Bruce was a doctor who for years took his medical arts to troubled parts of the world, including Iran. He and his wife worked tirelessly to bring relief to people shattered by warfare. Bruce saved lives and gave people hope.

In retirement, at some point Bruce's mind began to take little excursions, and eventually he became lost in the maze called Alzheimer's disease. It's hard to be that version of lost, as many of us know from supporting relatives or loved ones with dementia. But while Bruce may have been lost, he was simultaneously found. In his later years Bruce lived at the 18th Avenue Peace House in Portland, OR. The Peace House is home to a beautifully eclectic community of church folks, social justice workers, and people of diverse backgrounds who share life and work and needs and joys. They look out for each other daily.

I met Bruce one summer, when everyone at the Peace House was making food and setting up for a big celebration. Bruce walked through each room of the house, smiled brightly, offering his hand in greeting to new people, and mostly listened to the conversations. Clearly Bruce felt safe and at home in his community. As the day progressed and people swirled through for the party, Bruce shook my hand about five different times. Each time his bright eyes looked like he wanted to say something more, but words didn't come out.

At the end of the day, the partygoers drifted away, and we all said our goodbyes. This time Bruce took my hand, looked me in the eyes, and spoke one word: "Together." I think Bruce was telling me that he was part of a family, and that I was welcome in it too. Thanks be to God for being found.

In the name of the Searcher of lost sheep,
the Good Shepherd who brings us home,
and the Holy Spirit who rejoices.