

**September 14, 2025**

**In the Lost**

**The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson**

To kick off my sermon this morning I'm looking for a volunteer for a quick game.

The game is higher/lower or greater than/less than, ready?

How many sinners who repent does it take for God to rejoice?

Audience/congregation is it higher or lower?

The answer is one – Jesus concludes each of the two parables we heard this morning by proclaiming that “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

And, maybe it's important to situate ourselves in the narrative context of this revelation – to remind ourselves of the context that inspired these parables of lost things.

For that we go back 9 verses in our gospel pericope to the opening lines: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

It's not just that Jesus talks to or spends time with these tax collectors and sinners, Jesus *eats* with them

This table ministry that we end up hearing a lot about in the gospels is full of these stories of Jesus hanging with the wrong crowd

Trey Clark reminds us that “Tax collectors were often-despised individuals who gathered income on behalf of the Roman Empire. For many, they represented morally compromised people who were aligned with the

oppressor of the Jewish people. ‘Sinners’ is a rather general term to refer to individuals who are not included among the upright or righteous followers of God’s law.”<sup>1</sup>

No matter how you slice it, Jesus shouldn’t have broken bread with these outsiders – not according to the religious insiders who call him out on it

But as Professor Clark so duly notes: “this passage reveals that God is a God whose heart is insistent on closing chasms.”

And if I can add a word, I’d say this passage reveals that God is a God whose heart is insistent on closing false chasms.

The insiders that call Jesus out assume that the tax collectors and sinners are outsiders, that they have no place at Jesus’ table, no place at God’s table

But Jesus’ table is...Jesus’ table

Jesus’ table *is* a reflection of who *is* part of God’s Kingdom, who *are* God’s beloveds

And the answer is...everybody!

To God, none are on the outside, none are outside of God’s love - which is actually illustrated in Jesus’ parables

Debie Thomas writes about how her own mind was blown when she realized this truth about these parables: “how many years I spent misreading them,” she writes. “For a long time, I thought that the lost lamb and the lost coin represented sinners ‘out there.’ Out there beyond the fold, beyond the home country I call Christianity, beyond the purview of God, the Church, and me.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-24-3/commentary-on-luke-151-10-6>

“But no. The lost lamb in the first parable belongs to the shepherd’s flock from the very beginning of the story — it is his lamb. Likewise, the coin in the second parable belongs to the woman before she loses it; the coin is one of her very own. In other words, these parables are not about lost outsiders finding salvation and becoming Christians. These parables are about us, the insiders. The church-goers, the bread-and-wine consumers, the Bible readers. These are parables about lostness on the inside.”<sup>2</sup>

Let that sink in: these are parables about lostness on the inside

the lost sheep in Jesus’ story is 1 of the 100 the shepherd starts with

the lost coin is 1 of the 10 coins that the woman in the parable starts with

Perhaps you, like Debie, have been hearing this parable in a slightly different way in the past, as if the sinners that repent and return are somehow those who started on the outside to begin with

When in fact, there is as much chance the lost sheep/coin is you, is me...insiders

“We get lost over and over again, and God finds us over and over again,” Debie writes. “Lostness is not a blasphemous aberration; it’s part and parcel of the life of faith.

“But what does it mean to be lost?” she asks

“It means so many things. It means we lose our sense of belonging, we lose our capacity to trust, we lose our felt experience of God’s presence, we lose our will to persevere. Some of us get lost when illness descends...Some of us get lost when death comes too soon and too

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2356-on-lostness>

suddenly for someone we love...Some of us get lost in the throes of addiction, or anxiety, or lust, or unforgiveness, or hatred, or bitterness.”

We get lost over and over again

I have been lost this week – especially that way Debie first describes it: lost my sense of belonging, lost my capacity to trust, lost my felt experience of God’s presence, I even lost a bit of my will to persevere.

If God rejoices at the return of one lost sheep, you can imagine how many sheep need to be killed at the hands of another sheep for God to weep

I’ll tell you – any number greater than zero

This was not a week of God rejoicing, this was a week of God weeping

This was a week of me getting lost...

lost in the ugliness of social media posts

lost in the grotesque and hurtful nature of hate-filled rhetoric defended as free speech

lost in the brokenness of relationships beyond even my own circle of acquaintances to what seems like the American people in general

lost in our nation’s continued idolatry of guns

lost in a distorted notion of mourning that has us arguing over whether our grief over the loss of one is somehow supposed to be greater than or less than our grief over the more than 10,000 who have already died this year from gun violence<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>

lost in what feels like the recognition that we live in really troubling times

...and perhaps in naming these things like I have, I have added to your own feelings of "lost" this week

Dear Jesus, there is not just one lost sheep in your flock this morning, there are many

"If Jesus's parables are true," Debie Thomas writes, "then God isn't in the fold with the ninety-nine insiders. God isn't curled up on her couch polishing the nine coins she's already sure of. God is where the lost things are. God is where lostness reigns. God is in the darkness of the wilderness, God is in the remotest corners of the house, God is where the search is at its fiercest."

God is where the lost things are.

God is right here, right here

"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...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?"

Our God is the one who *goes after* you until you are found

Our God is the one who *lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully* to find you in whatever corner your lostness has banished you to

God is searching for you in the lostness, God finds you where you are

And when God finds you, God rejoices

This is not the first time I have felt so lost, and it won't be the last

And just as I am actively seeking answers and truths and hope in this deep chasm of lostness, I am leaning so hard into the truth that God is just as actively seeking me out and offering me grace upon grace upon grace

love upon love upon love

hope upon hope upon hope

May it be so, Lord, may it be so. Amen.