

“Joy in Finding”
 Rev. Eric. S. Corbin
 First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
 September 18, 2016

[Luke 15:1-10](#)

I was in the Boy Scouts many years ago. After our troop had arrived for a camping trip at a National Park, a friend and I decided to go for a hike on one of the many trails. We were certain to let one of the scout leaders know what we were doing, and then we took off on our hike. Maybe 30 minutes later, we were approached by a Park Ranger with a stern look on his face. He called out to me *by name*, which was pretty startling. Much worse, though, was when he said “You’re in pretty big trouble, Eric. Do I need to call Millie Finley on you?” That’s my grandmother. Shock really set in then. How does this Park Ranger know my name *and* my grandmother’s name? It turns out that this Park Ranger was a relative of mine, though I did not recognize him as I hadn’t seen him in a while and I did not know that he worked for the Park Service. I later learned that the stern look on his face and calling out my grandmother’s name was him giving me a hard time, not really that I was in such big trouble, at least with him, that is. It also turns out that the scout leader had not heard us when we said we were going on a hike, and so the leaders got more than a little alarmed when they looked around and could not find us. They called on the Park Service to find us, and find us they did.

I suppose I was a bit like that lost sheep that Jesus talked about. There are a couple of differences, though. One, the leaders did not leave the other scouts behind and search diligently for us; they sent someone else while they kept watch over the others. Two, they certainly did not rejoice when we were found. I recall much scolding and not a bit of celebrating that we were safely returned to the troop.

Maybe it’s like the rancher in this Chevy commercial from a few years ago. ([play video](#)) He goes out in search of that one lost calf and picks it up to return it to the fold. I noticed, though, that he took the time to repair the fence first before going out in search of the one lost calf, ensuring that the other cattle would remain safe. In Jesus’ parable, he clearly states that the shepherd “leave[s] the ninety-nine in the wilderness.”

In neither of these examples did the one in charge leave the others in the wilderness while looking for the one who was lost. In the parable, Jesus says “**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?” In other words, which one of you doesn’t endanger the lives of ninety-nine sheep to go looking for that one dumb sheep that got lost? The answer is “every one of us.” Every one of the shepherds would stay with the ninety-nine and hope that the one makes its way back. If not, they would cut their losses and move on. It’s just the sensical thing to do when you’ve only lost 1% of your flock.

In Jesus' second story, things make a bit more sense, at least at first. This woman has only ten silver coins, and she's lost one of them. Now we're talking about a 10% loss, rather than a 1% loss. Besides, she doesn't leave the other nine coins in harm's way while she looks for the one which is lost. Lighting a lamp, sweeping the house, and searching carefully for that lost coin is a reasonable thing to do. The story gets unreasonable, though, when she finds the coin. Jesus said "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.'" This isn't posting a status on Facebook: "I found my lost coin. Smiley-face." This isn't texting some friends or picking up the telephone to talk with someone. Jesus says she "calls together her friends and neighbors" to rejoice. This is a big deal – the woman must get the word out that she's having a party, she's got to make the arrangements, she's got to prepare some food. She's got to get some helium balloons, a cake, and punch. Perhaps not, but she does have to go to some expense to celebrate – and perhaps the celebration cost even more than what she had found. Jesus says "what woman" *doesn't* do this? What woman doesn't spend more on a celebration than that which she found? Again, every one. Jesus phrases these questions as if this is the normal, expected response, and it just is not, at least for us.

Who would have such an over-the-top response to finding the lost? Our God, that's who. *That's* the point of these parables of Jesus, to show the extreme difference in how we would respond and how God responds. Those hearing Jesus ask "who wouldn't respond this way" would be looking around at each other, shaking their heads and saying "not me." And then Jesus throws the punch line at them: "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." And later, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Now that sheep was unlikely to do much repenting, and the coin definitely did not do any repenting, but the focus is not really on the sheep or the coin. It's on the one who goes searching. The action verbs are all his: leave, go after, has found, lays it on his shoulders, rejoices, comes home, calls together. The focus is on a shepherd who risks everything to find that which is lost, on the woman who sweeps and searches until she finds that which is lost. Again, the action verbs are all hers: lights a lamp, sweeps the house, searches carefully, calls together. This is one parable of Jesus where the allegory is quite clear – the shepherd and the woman represent God, a God who will stop at nothing to redeem the lost and then will throw a huge party.

Notice, though, who the stand-ins for God are – a shepherd, a member of the lowest of socio-economic positions in the culture of the day, and a poor woman, whose status in the extremely patriarchal society of the day would be next to nothing. *These* are the examples Jesus gives of how God works in this world, so perhaps it's not only a metaphor for God's seeking and finding. Perhaps it's also a statement that God works through ordinary people like you and me to seek those who are lost. It is then our task to throw a party – to celebrate with God the redemption of the lost. This redemption comes through us to those in need of being found. It is an active seeking of the lost, not just hoping and praying the lost will return. I do not think it's stretching the metaphor too thin to say that we should be involved in seeking the lost outside the

walls of this church and inviting them in, not just waiting for them to find us on their own. We must leave, go after, find, rejoice, and call together, just like this shepherd and this woman.

Perhaps it's like when our little 12-pound dog went missing a few weeks ago. When our dog went missing, we all went out in search of her. I was at a meeting at the kids' school, and I left that early. I was supposed to come here to the church next for a meeting, and I did not make it to that meeting. Instead, I drove home as fast as I could get there, and I joined in the search which Kristi and the kids were already undertaking. We prayed mightily while we drove and walked around, yelling out our dog's name everywhere, asking every person who was outside if they had seen her. We posted it on Facebook and on our neighborhood's website, and others joined in the search. There was a woman who took extra laps around the block with her own dog, hoping that her dog might find our dog. Two young boys we didn't even know rode around on bikes looking for her. A neighbor came out and helped us knock on doors to see if anyone had seen her. Another neighbor gave us a lead on a woman who had found a dog, but we weren't sure who the woman was or if it indeed was our dog. Finally, as it became dark, we returned home, quite leery of the fate of our little, old dog, outside in the August heat. After finding a Facebook page for missing pets in Champaign County, we discovered that a neighbor we didn't know had indeed found her and taken her to the 24-hour clinic at the University's Veterinary Teaching Hospital. She was safe and healthy. After all of that diligent searching, when one of the kids and I went to pick her up, there was indeed much rejoicing. There was great joy in finding our dog who was lost. There was even talk of throwing a party to celebrate, though busy schedules prevented that.

The sheep and the coin in Jesus' parables, the calf in the commercial, our dog – none of them could fully understand how lost they were. They did not understand the dangers they were encountering. Those who were searching understood it, and thus they rejoiced greatly when finding that which was lost. Perhaps we, too, do not always understand how lost we are. Yes, if you are listening to this sermon, you are either in church or watching online or listening to the radio. When we're being intentional about worshipping in some form or another, it's easy to think that we are on the other side of the lost/found process. "I once was lost but now I'm found" says Amazing Grace. I love that hymn. Probably most of you do, as well. However, that line could lead us to think that this is a one-time situation. We *once* were lost, but now we're found. The truth is that all of us, in some ways, go from lost to found and back to lost. We don't have it all together. We are all broken, hurting people and we are all in need of being found, over and over again, by our loving God, even when we don't realize how much danger we are in. The good news of this parable is that God rejoices greatly in finding us. God is extravagant in celebration, throwing a party when just one of us is found. And God does not grow weary of the celebration. Many of us were brought up to think of God as stern as the face of my relative the Park Ranger. We think of God like Jonathan Edwards did in his famous 18th-century sermon titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." I much prefer the view of God found in Psalm 30, "For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning." The joy of our God is unfathomable. Our God throws huge parties with the angels when any one of us turns toward God. The Message paraphrase says "that's the kind of party God's angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God." We all are in need of constantly turning to

God, and this world is in need of us seeking out those who are lost so that they, too, can turn to God. When we do, the biggest party we can imagine takes place. Let us all be caught up in the indescribable joy of our God when one of us is found. Amen.