

The Way Home

Luke 15:1-7

14th Sunday after Pentecost/ 11th September 2022

When I was around five years old, I got lost. It took place in a department store in Kearny, New Jersey, called Two Guys (once a small store chain throughout Northern New Jersey). I was with my mother, Grace, and my younger brother, Craig. Somehow, I don't remember how I got separated from them. What I do remember is sitting on the customer service counter, which was located on the first floor, in the center of the store, and that I was crying, scared, surrounded by strangers, and very worried. Eventually, my mother showed up with Craig in tow. She reached out to me, I reached out to her, and I cried even more. That experience shook me. It took me a while to calm down. I think we stopped to get some ice cream on the way home. My mother always knew what to do.

Perhaps, because of that experience, I don't like getting lost. Maybe because of that experience, I have an excellent sense of direction and never get lost—temporarily misdirected, maybe, but never lost.

It's not fun getting lost, especially with all the associated feelings that come with *lostness*. Feeling separated, feeling abandoned, cut off, alone.

One time I abandoned someone. Unintentionally, but it happened. It was on the first tour of Scotland that I led back in 1996. We had 35 in our group. We were on the Isle of Skye, way up in the north of Scotland, and stopped at the Clan Donald Centre on the island's south end. From there, we headed north to Kyle of Lochalsh, toward the mainland, where we were to spend the night. When I lead tours, I always have the group count-off before the bus pulls away from a stop (much to the consternation and frustration of the group). One time we didn't count. We drove off. Soon, someone asked, "Where's Madeleine?" We thought she was in the restroom on the bus. But she wasn't. Twenty minutes *en route* along a single-track road, we had to turn the large bus around, using a farm lane to do a K-turn and then headed back to collect her. She was sitting there in the parking lot, alone. The bus stopped, and I ran out, wrapped my arms around her, and said, "Madeleine, I'm *so* sorry!" She laughed. "No worries, Ken. As a mother of nine, I'm used to leaving one of my kids behind." That's the last time I left someone behind on a tour (at least, I think so).

No one likes getting lost. With navigation systems in our cars and cell phones, few of us risk getting lost these days. I wonder, though, if people are losing the ability to read maps.

Sometimes we do get lost. Lost, not on the way to the Columbia Mall or Camden Yards, but lost in terms of purpose, direction, and meaning. Increasingly, I sense that more and more people are wandering aimlessly, looking for home, not really clear about who they are or what they feel called to do. With the crisis of contemporary Christianity upon us, with fewer people going to church, with church attendance in rapid decline post-COVID, anxiety on the rise, the troubling political climate we find ourselves in, the divisiveness of society, and fear about the future, concerns about climate change, people look for ways to calm their nerves through materialism, careerism, consumerism, fanaticism, and fundamentalism. Thinking we can shop our way toward meaning, or that things will make us happy, or work our way toward purpose, or medicate our way out of the anxiety of life through addictions. The signs are everywhere, we have lost our moorings, and we're set adrift—like we were set adrift after the events of September 11, 2001, or how many feel today in the United Kingdom and around the world mourning the death of Queen Elizabeth II, who reigned for seventy years.

It might seem that it's worse today than ever before. Every generation, I think, feels it was better in an earlier time. Sometimes that's true. Often, it's an illusion. What's clear, though, is that this feeling of being lost, of searching and wandering in a world coming unhinged, is not new to human experience. It's part of the human condition. It's been with us for a very long time. Poets and prophets are usually the ones who are in touch with these feelings. The poet John Donne (1572-1631) wrote: *Tis all in pieces/ all coherence gone.* ("An Anatomy of the World"). Several centuries later, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) wrote:

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre,
The falcon cannot hear the falconer.
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.* ("The Second Coming")

Perhaps it feels like things are falling apart, that things don't make any sense, that we're set adrift and lost because we have a deeper memory or deeper feeling that there was a time when we were whole, when things made sense, when we felt at home.

When I speak of being lost, I don't mean, in a metaphysical sense, that is, lost to God, the opposite of being "saved." I know many Christians who trust in Jesus yet feel

lost and confused and suffer from anxiety. While they were “once lost, but now found” by grace, it doesn’t mean they know where they are or where they’re going.

The truth is, there are times, even as faithful Christians, when we lose our way. We forget who we are and whose we are, and we fall, fall away from ourselves, fall away from God, fall away from the things that matter most. There are times when life becomes so overwhelming and complex or times when everything is going so well that we start to stray from the straight and narrow path; we lose our way, lose our footing, and begin to wander away from who we are, wander away from God, wander away from the things that give us life and meaning and purpose.

If we wander away for too long, go down other paths, take detours, or get stuck in cul-de-sacs, it’s difficult to make our way home, back to our true selves, to God, back to a life of meaning. We then settle for living with falsehoods and falsity in service to false and lesser selves; we know we miss that relationship with God that we had at one time; we remember those former times, but we’ve been away for so long it feels impossible to go back; perhaps tempted by false gods and meaningless, mindless ways of living, you forget the way back.

The Pharisees and scribes were grumbling one day about Jesus. “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). From the Pharisees and scribes’ perspective, Jesus associates with people who have lost their way, who have left the straight and narrow, who have left the fold, as it were. Not only does Jesus welcome them, he eats with them and hangs out with them, which infuriates the religious leaders. Jesus probably prefers the company of honest sinners to self-righteous religious folks. And so, what Jesus does is remarkable: instead of judging them for being sinners, instead of keeping them at arms’ length, instead of being moralistic about it all, Jesus offers them a still more excellent way (1 Corinthians 12:31).

Jesus shares a parable: “Which 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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying..., ‘Rejoice with me...’” (Luke 15: 4-6).

Many here have heard this parable of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine to go after the one lost sheep. We know *about* the story, but the text requires more than knowledge. It asks for something more: Are you *in* the story? Is this your story? Is it your experience? Can you feel what Jesus is saying here?

It might be helpful to compare Luke's version of the parable with Matthew's. In Luke 15, we have three parables, the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost (prodigal) son. Matthew's take is different. Turn to Matthew 18:12. The parable of the shepherd is given in the context of Jesus' teaching on how we care for our children. "If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices..." Looks plain enough, doesn't it? Appears the same as Luke. Now turn to Luke 15:4, ...does not the shepherd "leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices."

Did you hear it? Do you see the subtle yet significant difference, the contrasting theological slant of Matthew and Luke? In Matthew, the shepherd looks for the lost sheep, but it's uncertain whether he'll find it. "And *if* he finds it..." The outcome is in doubt. What does Luke say? The shepherd will go after the lost one and won't stop *until* he finds it. There's no question about the outcome because it says, "when he has found it," he will place it on his shoulders, rejoicing all the way home. Luke adds, "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost" (Luke 15:6).

My sheep that was lost. My sheep that was lost. My sheep! Luke makes a bold theological claim. There's no question for him that the lost will be found. Jesus says that even when lost, the sheep still belong to him. Even when we're lost, we're not truly lost because even when we stray, we still belong to the Lord. The psalmist knew this truth when he affirmed, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" (Psalm 139:7-8). But when we get lost (and we do and will), the good news is that the Lord never rests until we're found and brought back home.

You see, *this* is who God is; this is the profound *image* of God that Jesus is placing before us. This is who God is, and this is what God does. Indeed, God never rests until all the lost have been brought home. The lost might not know it or even feel it—when you're lost, it feels like you're all alone—but the Lord of Love is searching for you. You might think that you're not worthy of such love, that you're beyond hope, beyond help, you might feel that, but that's not the whole story. The whole story, the deeper, broader story, is that you are worthy, worthy of God's hot pursuit to find you and bring you back, up on his shoulders, rejoicing all the way home. *There's no judgment for getting lost, only rejoicing over being found.* It's a joy that the shepherd is eager to share with his friends and neighbors: *Come and see who's back! Look who's here! Look who's home!* This is

what Scripture means by grace. *Grace finds us when we're lost, lifts us, and then takes us home rejoicing.* And this is what grace feels like.

The irony here, though, is that for us to know what grace feels like, *really* feels like, we first must be lost or acknowledge that we are already lost. It's no mistake that Dante Alighieri (c.1265-1321) begins the *Divine Comedy*, his story of descending into hell and ending before the beatific vision of God, with these words. The first lines of the *Inferno*, part one of the Comedy, are: *In the midway of this our mortal life,/ I found me in a gloomy wood, astray/ Gone from the path direct: (Inferno, Canto 1).*

Dante lost his way. And now the journey begins. The ones who have been to hell and back know what it means to be found. The prodigal had to leave home and fall, hit rock bottom, and eat with the pigs for him to discover who he was and how much his father cared about him. We have to get lost to be found. This is what theologians call the happy fall, *felix culpa*.¹ Those who are never lost never know what it feels like to be found. The history of the church is full of women and men who give witness to this truth.

Look at John Newton (1725-1807), who wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace." He knew what a wretch he was as a slave trader. In his sin, brokenness, and apparent alienation from God, he discovers God's transforming love. The same was true for the apostle Paul. Even though he was, as he admits, a "blasphemer, persecutor, and a man of violence" (1 Tim. 1:13), he still received mercy, "...and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me," he said, "with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance" —in other words, Paul says, trust me, I know what I'm talking about—"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim 1:15).

One of the burdens upon my heart is that I wish more people knew that they're not really lost but are already found and ultimately belong to the Lord. Always have. Always will. And that the Lord will not rest until he finds them, find us, until we know that we've been found, to then rejoice with us and over us.

Knowing this with our heads is not enough. We need to feel it, to see ourselves within the story. This might help provide a way into the story, a guided imagery. I invite you to close your eyes. Relax.

Imagine a lost sheep wandering from the fold...

Look at the lost sheep...

Imagine it found.

Imagine the weight of the sheep on Jesus' shoulders, being carried home...

*Now, imagine that you're that lost sheep,
afraid, alone, cut off, anxious, worried....*

See yourself found by the one who's been searching for you because he loves you...

The Shepherd lifts you up.

*Feel the strength of the Shepherd underneath you,
as he carries you on his shoulders,
maybe the way your mother or father used to carry you as a girl or boy.*

Imagine the Shepherd rejoicing because you've been found....

Now, see yourself arriving home,

hear the joy in the Shepherd's voice, "Rejoice with me."

Hear his words with the ear of your heart. Feel his joy.

Rejoice with him.

You have been found.

Home. Home, indeed.

¹ Cf. Aldo Carotenuto, *To Love, To Betray: Life as Betrayal* (Wilmette, IL: Chiron Publications, 1996), vii-viii, 145. G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1830) also referred to this as "upward falling."