

Lost Sheep, Coin, Son

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Preacher: Preaching Cohort

[0 : 0 0] Hello! Good morning Table Church family. For those of you who are joining us for the first time today, welcome. We're so glad you're here. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Anna Elcaro. My partner and I attended the Columbia Heights location back when we can meet in person and have been attending the Table Church for about three years now.

For those of you who are saying to yourselves right now, wow, she doesn't look like Pastor Anthony, well that's because I'm not him. But today you get a special treat which is you get to hear from myself and two other preachers who are in the Table Church's preaching cohort, which is a group of your church peers who are learning the sacred art of preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. Erin, Heidi, and I today are going to be preaching a sermon that we're calling Search Party. A reminder and a challenge to all of us that God never stops seeking the lost and neither should we. Today we're in the third Sunday of Lent and during this Lenten season we've been working our way through the book of Luke and preaching on different stories and parables from the life of Jesus. Last week Pastor Becky preached a really thought-provoking sermon on Luke 13, specifically the parables of the fig tree in the vineyard and the gracious caretaker, and the one where Jesus describes himself as a mother hen who gathers her chicks under her wings.

I think it was a really great message and has challenged me to think a lot and so if you didn't have a chance to watch it I encourage you to go back and check out the recording. For this week we're going to be working our way through a trio of parables in Luke 15, which many of you have probably heard before or read. They're all about things that were lost.

A lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. The first parable about a lost sheep, Jesus is talking about someone who owns a hundred sheep and loses one and chooses to leave the 99 of them in open country and go out and find that one lost sheep. The second parable is about a woman who loses a coin.

She lights a lamp, she searches all night in her home, and she finds the coin and celebrates with her friends. The third parable is about a son who demands his inheritance from his father, goes out and is lost from his father, and eventually comes home. We're going to read it, and the father is reunited with him and is so happy. Some people call this one the prodigal son or the story of the gracious father. But in any case, all these stories highlight that when something valuable is lost, you are called to go find it. When something valuable is lost, we are called to go find it.

[2 : 4 9] When I was maybe 11 or 12, I think I was in middle school, I got it in my mind that I really wanted a dog. I became fixated on this concept, I think probably because it showed up in a lot of movies in the 90s.

I really wanted a golden retriever. Again, these 90s tropes, you know, air bud, homeward bound, this was like the dog for me. So Christmas morning comes around, and I see this big present under the tree, and I open it, and there inside the box is the sweetest little puppy. And of course, it wasn't a golden retriever. No, my dad went out and he bought our family a purebred Airedale Terrier. Most of you are probably thinking to yourselves, I'm not really sure what that breed is. What is it? What is she talking about? Yeah, I know, exactly. Well, Zoe, that's what we named her, Zoe. Zoe, an Airedale Terrier, was a 55 pound lovable dog that was bred in England for hunting otters, difficult farm work, and military combat. I didn't make that up. I read that in Wikipedia. So naturally, this wild pup didn't love it when we kept her cooped up in the kitchen at times of our home. So what she would do was she would escape a lot, not unlike the sheep or the coin or that son that I just described or we're going to read about in the parables. Yes, Zoe, our lovable dog, would have her run of the neighborhood for hours. But naturally, as you can imagine, our neighbors didn't love this. So somebody had to go after her, somebody had to chase her. And that was usually me. I'm joking, it was never me, it was usually my dad. One story goes that my dad found Zoe fallen into a pond behind one of our neighbors' house. It was grown over with moss and we think that Zoe had mistaken it for grass. But yeah, how many of you know my dad wasn't super jazzed to reach in there and grab my dog out of that sludge-filled pond and drag her home? The point being here is that we seek out what is lost and what belongs to us.

Zoe was a part of our family and ultimately we wanted to bring her home. With that said, please turn with me to Luke chapter 15 verse 1. I'm going to get my Bible for this.

Luke is about two-thirds of the way through the Bible and it is the third chapter in the New Testament or the third book in the New Testament of Matthew, Mark, Luke. We're in Luke 15 and we're going to read the whole passage. So just please, you know, prepare your hearts and your minds for that. Prepare yourself to be in a posture of listening and hopefully God will illuminate something new for you all today. So here it is. Let's start off at verse 1.

Luke 15. Now the tax collectors and the sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable.

[5 : 53] Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and you lose one of them. Doesn't he leave the 99 in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and he says, Rejoice with me. I have found my lost sheep. I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Jesus goes on. Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp? Sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it. And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, Rejoice with me. I have found my lost coin. In the same way I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Finally, Jesus continues. He says, There was a man. There was a man. There was a man who had two sons.

The younger one said to his father, Father, give me a share of the estate. So the father divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had and he set off for a distant country and then he squandered his wealth on wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in the whole country and he began to be in need. Uh oh. So he went out and the son hired himself out to a citizen of that country who sent him into his fields to feed his pigs.

He longed to be filled. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods of the pigs that were eating, but no one gave him anything. So when the son came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare? And here I am starving to death. I'll set out. I'll go back to my father and I'll say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and he went to his father.

[8 : 05] But while the boy was still a far ways off, the father saw him and he was filled with compassion for him. The father was filled with compassion. So he ran to his son and he threw his arms around him and he kissed him. The son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him, put the ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it.

I'll have a feast and celebrate for this son of mine was dead and is alive again. He was lost and now he was found. And they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son, he was still in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. Your brother has come, he replied. And your father has killed the fatted calf because he has him back safe and sound. But the older brother became angry with this and he refused to go into the party. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, Look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when the son of yours who squandered your property, Ooh, this son of yours with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him.

My son, the father said, you were always with me and everything I have, it's yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is now found.

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. Right away, and this is an aside, I think it's worth highlighting that Jesus is a fantastic storyteller.

Confusing at times, cryptic, but fantastic, nonetheless. I'm continually impressed by Jesus' ability to call at a moment's notice upon a story with wonderful imagery to illustrate examples of the point he's trying to make. A sheep and a shepherd, a woman and a coin, sons and their father.

[10 : 22] And I guarantee that Jesus didn't have to sit around for hours thinking about some anecdote that applied, like a story about his family dog, Zoe. But I digress. Anyways, in this parable, Jesus is with his disciples. At the beginning, you learn that they are learning from him, following him.

And he's also with the teachers of the law and the Pharisees. And they believe that they already know about God. But the truth of the matter is both of these groups are lost. And Jesus knows that. He's speaking to both groups. He's letting them know that God is seeking them. He wants them back. And he is encouraging us to do the same. As the passages in Isaiah 53 6 notes, we all like sheep have gone astray.

Each one of us has turned our own way. Later on in Luke, in chapter 19, verse 10, Jesus says, For the Son of Man comes to seek the lost and save the lost. I don't know who needs to hear this today, but all of us and you are the thing of value that Jesus is seeking. But of course, being found isn't the end of the story, we're also called to seek the lost as well. And with that, I'm going to pass it off to Erin. Good morning. My name is Erin Byrne and I'm the director of family ministry here at the table.

I know the parables that Anna read get told a lot in churches. In Table Kids, we have felt figures for all three. Jesus' Jewish listeners would also have been familiar with them. They would have known the passage from Isaiah that Anna just mentioned, as well as Psalm 23, which tells us, The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. In these and other verses, the writers of the Hebrew scriptures describe God as a loving shepherd and the early Jewish community as the ones who stray from God. So the parable of the lost sheep would strike a similar chord. Jesus' Jewish audiences would be familiar with the idea that over and over again in the scriptures, the community disobeys God, but God continues to seek them and care for them.

And that is still true today. God continues to seek us and care for us. There is one big difference between the older passages about sheep and the one that Jesus tells. In the Hebrew scriptures, all of the sheep stray from God. But in the parable of the lost sheep, only one is gone.

[12 : 48] This is not about the whole community disobeying God. It's about one lonely, vulnerable sheep. I don't spend much time around sheep in my own life, and I don't know too many people who do.

But Jesus' audience probably had some shepherds. Let's look at the parable of the lost sheep through their eyes. This is Luke 15, verse 3. So he told them this parable. 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 until he is found it? This passage always shocks me a little. Really, a shepherd would leave ninety-nine safe sheep to find one? Isn't that much more dangerous? But I am not a shepherd. A shepherd listening to Jesus would know that there is safety in numbers, that the ninety-nine will be okay. Maybe they ask another shepherd to take care of their flock in the meantime, which sometimes happened in Jesus' time, or maybe not. But a shepherd's job is to take care of all of their sheep. A lost sheep can get hurt.

It has no shelter. It is vulnerable to the weather and to the wolves. If you are a good and responsible shepherd, you know how far you would go for your sheep. So who are the lost? Reading all of Luke 15, we sometimes think of the lost as the wasteful, prodigal son, as people who insult God and then run as far away as they can. Maybe. But the sheep didn't insult anyone. It just walked in the wrong direction, and nobody saw it leave. The lost coin certainly can't be blamed. So whose fault is it that the sheep and the coin got lost? Was the woman careless? Was the shepherd irresponsible?

Is this the same shepherd who makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters? As biblical scholar A.J. Levine points out, God is a good shepherd, and God does not lose people.

God doesn't fail to see the sheep wandering off or miss the coin that drops into the cracks. The church loses people. The church worries about the 99 sheep and misses the one that quietly disappeared. This point is especially striking with the story of the lost coin. The coin doesn't turn away from God or even wander off from the church. It just falls through the cracks.

[15 : 10] As a church community, we are called to keep track. Jesus calls us to serve those in our community who are lost. Who in our community is struggling? Who doesn't have the food or the shelter they need?

Who is grieving? How can we make sure that we are keeping everyone safe from the wolves? This has been tough for me during COVID. I felt my immediate community get smaller. I don't have the energy to check in with everybody I would usually see on a weekly basis. In the times in the last year when I felt vulnerable, I haven't even known what to ask for. I felt exhausted and often I felt hopeless.

Theologian Kenneth Bailey writes, Yet was it wise to leave the 99 and wander away searching for the one? Does the individual matter or are the people alone important? Indeed, Bailey writes, it is the shepherd's willingness to go after the one that gives the 99 their real security. When the shepherd pays a high price to find the one, he thereby offers the profoundest security to the many. I love this idea. We know the sheep were essential to early Middle Eastern life. It is often through references to women that we learn about the everyday aspects of biblical life. And in Proverbs 31, we learn about the importance of sheep and wool through the lens of a woman who seeks out wool and flax and works with eager hands. Her fingers work the spindle.

She makes cloth and she sells it. She is clothed with strength and with splendor. Sheep and wool were indispensable in Jesus's culture. Each sheep is valuable and that it is the job of the shepherd to look out for every single one. When a shepherd seeks out one lost sheep, they prove to the other sheep that if they wander off, the shepherd will look after them too. When we, the Table Church, build a community that looks out for each person when they are in need. We know that this community will also look out for us in our time of need. Each of us is sometimes the one sheep that was lost and is also sometimes, often, one of the 99. It is the job of the church to seek the lost, to make sure that we are always taking care of all 100 sheep and that nobody is left in the cold.

Luke 15 comes from a section of the gospel where Jesus is heading to Jerusalem with his disciples. His disciples didn't really understand that Jesus was about to die, but he knew, and in telling the parables, Jesus prepared his followers to keep building God's kingdom after his death. It was a kingdom they would have to build from the ashes, and Jesus was teaching them how to do that.

[17 : 43] This year, during Lent, we're preparing for Easter, but we're also, hopefully, preparing for a world where we can regather. Like the disciples of the early church, we are coming from a time of grief and sometimes hopelessness, but we also have a toolkit with us. As we start to hope, we have a rare opportunity to set a foundation. How do we, the Table Church, work to build God's kingdom? What can we, like the disciples, learn from the parables in Luke 15 in order to serve people better?

As we prepare for someday meeting in person again, we can also prepare ourselves to make sure we are loving every single member of our community well by looking out for one another. I think that's going to take some work, and we see that in the story of the lost coin. As Anna read, the woman loses a coin and then she lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until she finds it.

Looking out for our community requires us to be active and intentional. It requires us to know who is supposed to be there so that we can reach out and check in when someone is missing or hurting.

I expect that after over a year of meeting virtually, seeing one another in person will feel a bit like culture shock. I am an extrovert, and I also know most of you, and I'm still expecting to feel pretty overwhelmed and underprepared to rebuild an in-person community. I will need to work to pay attention to who is missing and be intentional about checking in with the people I know.

But this is also an opportunity. Someday soon, hopefully, I'll be able to have people over for a meal indoors at my apartment. We'll be able to meet up for lunch or dinner after church service to make sure that people who have joined in the last year are fully able to be a part of the community.

[19 : 28] I know the pandemic has been especially hard on families, and someday soon, we'll be able to spend time with kids in person as a church and give families the opportunity to connect with one another. We don't know when that time will be, but we do know that right now, we have the opportunity to prepare our community to look after one another, to do things as reckless as leaving 99 safe sheep to look after the one that is lost. In Luke 15, Jesus ends the story of the lost sheep by saying, verse 5, When he, the shepherd, has found the sheep, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

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. The party at the end of this section feels a little surprising.

A shepherd, whose job is to take care of the sheep, would have a celebration for finding the sheep they were supposed to take care of all along? The shepherds in Jesus' audience are looking at each other.

Jesus' guy is a little goofy. Maybe he just really likes to celebrate. I'm going to turn it over to Heidi to talk us through what Jesus tells us about reunion and rejoicing in Luke 15.

Hey, everyone. My name is Heidi Mills, and I have been attending the table for about three years now. I'm here to pick up where Aaron left off. Many of you are probably familiar with the last story in Luke 15.

[20 : 56] We're going to talk about today, which is the prodigal son. Honestly, I was a little bit nervous when I heard that we were going to be preaching on this passage, because if you've grown up in church at all, you've probably heard this story a million times.

I wouldn't be surprised if many of you kind of zoned out when you heard we were going to be talking about this story, because when I sat down to write this sermon, I wondered, what else new can I say about this passage?

But I want to look at this text today not only through the lens of the younger brother, which you're probably familiar with, but of the older brother and our responsibility to care and rejoice with one another.

Most of the time when I read this story, I immediately relate to the character of the younger brother. It is easy to see how he becomes lost. At the beginning of the parable, we read that he asks his father for his inheritance early.

This would have been out of the ordinary for two reasons. First, usually inheritances were given to the sons after the father died. By asking for his inheritance early, he was basically saying to his father, I wish you were dead.

[22 : 00] And second, the older son, as the firstborn, would have had more of a right to the inheritance early, and he would have received a double portion. So the younger son kind of cut the line.

But we don't know why the younger son made this request. Perhaps the younger son made the decision to leave because he already felt rejected and estranged from his family. Sometimes the desire to get away and make a fresh start can be overwhelming.

Regardless of the reasons, the father granted his request and the son leaves for a foreign country. But he soon learns that independence is not all it's cracked up to be. In verse 13, we read that the son spent his inheritance on prodigal living.

We don't know what this looks like because the Bible doesn't really tell us. But I can imagine that it was caused by a mixture of both pride and foolishness. After all, all of us trying to make it on our own make mistakes along the way.

Unfortunately for the prodigal son, he was left with nothing. Verse 15 tells us that he was poor, hungry, and alone in a strange land when no one would help him. He wanted nothing more than to return home, but he feared that he would not be welcomed back to his family.

[23 : 09] Maybe some of us can relate to that. I have often felt like a prodigal myself. When I moved to D.C. three years ago, I questioned my relationship with God and the church.

I did not believe many of the more conservative beliefs that my family instilled in me. And this caused a rift not only between me and my family, but between me and God. Some of you might feel disconnected from God and the church.

Others of you might feel like mistakes you have made have disqualified you from a relationship with God. Others of you may simply feel lost and uncertain about your place within God's family.

I can imagine that some of the tax collectors and sinners in the original audience felt the same way. But in verse 20, we read that the father saw the son coming from a long way off and ran to embrace him.

The father did not know the son would return, but he never stopped hoping. He never stopped looking. In the same way, God is always on the lookout, waiting to embrace anyone and everyone who decides to return home.

[24 : 10] The son did not have to beg for forgiveness. He did not have to work off his debts to his father in the field. Instead, all the son had to do was show up. But there was one character at the end of the story who has not yet been found.

Truly. And that is the character of the older brother. Most servants I've ever heard have viewed the older brother as the worst sort of Pharisee. This kind of legalistic religious figure, more focused on following the letter of the law rather than loving one's neighbor.

He's often seen as the antagonist. The one who refuses to celebrate. The one who complains about not being able to celebrate with his friends. The angry person who stays out in the field when he should be celebrating.

But I have learned to view the older brother a little bit differently. For those of us who have lived and worked in D.C. for a while, productivity can seem to be a status symbol. We are constantly pressured to perform, to work to the best of our abilities to get ahead.

Even in the church, we can be more focused on doing for God rather than being in a relationship with God. Anyone who is felt overlooked for their hard work and diligence can in some ways relate to the story of the older brother.

[25 : 19] So the story begins to shift when we realize that he is just as lost, just as lonely, just as scared of the father's rejection. He's too focused on earning his role within the family that he forgets that everything the father has is already his.

Verse 12 says that the father divided his property between them. In other words, both of the brothers had already received their inheritance. That means that the fatted calf that the older brother was then younger forgetting is rightfully his.

In verse 31, the father reiterates this point when he says, You are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. Our relationship with God does not require us to earn our value and work for what we have already received.

Instead, all we have to do is recognize the riches of that relationship right in front of us. But there's even more to this story. We see the two sons interact more deeply with the father, but we do not see the two brothers interact with each other at all.

We even see in verse 30 that the older brother basically disowns the younger, calling him the son of yours. I also can't help but think that the son is making up that thing about the prostitutes.

[26 : 29] Because there's no way he would know what his brother got up to when he was gone. But what's clear is that the relationship between the two of them has been broken. Let's look at this from the perspective of the older brother.

If the younger brother is welcomed back into the family, that means that the inheritance that has already been given to the older son would need to be shared once again with the younger.

There is a cost to this reconciliation. For the older son, welcoming the other brother back would require him to renounce some of that privilege to restore a right relationship.

He would have to give up that fatted calf. But in verse 31, the father reminds the older brother of the true treasure. This brother of yours was dead and he has come to life.

He was lost and has been found. He turns the tables on him. He reminds the older brother that there is room for both of them within his family. For anyone who may have come from a broken home like me, you know that there are few earthly treasures greater or more rare than a reconciled family.

[27 : 33] By welcoming the younger brother, the older brother is able to participate in the joyful celebration of a family made whole and inclusive again. But we are left on this cliffhanger.

We don't know what the older brother decides to do. And in the original audience, the Pharisees and the tax collectors would have been reflecting on this and thinking about what would we do in that position.

In the same way, we also are forced into a position of asking ourselves that same question. The brothers may be reconciled with their father.

They might be reconciled with God, but they are not reconciled with each other. And that work of reconciling with each other is probably the hardest work of all. And yet that is precisely the work God calls us to do.

So in this season of Lent, we are reminded of the lengthy and lonely journey Jesus took to the cross. Jesus knew when he told these parables to the Pharisees, tax collectors, and sinners that he was going to be leaving them soon.

[28 : 35] He reminded both of them that when he was gone, they would need to still be in relationship with each other. And he challenged them to consider what that relationship might look like once he was no longer present.

This parable of the lost brothers shows us the importance of reconciling with each other as a reflection or an image of the love of God that has already been revealed to us.

So as we continue to slog through this year, which is honestly often felt like 365 days of Lent, we have an opportunity to refocus our attention on relationships.

Anna called us to remember that we are constantly being called, that we're constantly being sought after by God. Aaron challenged us to consider the ways in which we can seek after those who have been lost, especially as we prepare to meet in person again.

We have to constantly think of ways to make sure that no one is missing on that day. As Jesus models for us in these parables, we are invited to come back to the loving embrace of a God who is constantly seeking us out.

[29 : 36] But then we are also called to extend that love to others. So as you move through your week and as you move through the season of Lent, our hope is that you find a way, however small, to reach out to others and invite them back into joyful relationship with God and with one another.