

Tracy Daub
9/11/22—University Presbyterian Church
Luke 15:1-10

LOST VALUABLES

When did you ever see Jesus depicted with a broom in his hand? My bet is, never. We've seen plenty of pictures of Jesus carrying a shepherd's staff—even though he himself never actually worked as a shepherd. In our reading today, Jesus tells two parables about lost things: a shepherd in search of a lost sheep and a woman in search of a lost coin. Both represent God and God's determined search for us when we are lost. In our imaginations, we can picture Jesus as the shepherd, with a staff in his hand, searching diligently for the lost sheep. Artists have helped bring this image to life.

But what about the other story—the one about the woman who sweeps her house for her lost coin? Why have we not imagined Jesus holding the broom, sweeping the house until that precious coin is found? A broom carries just as much weight as a shepherd's staff for symbolizing God's determined search for the lost. And notice how bishops in other Christian traditions will carry staffs in church processions but interestingly enough, not brooms. To imagine a procession of clergy marching into churches with brooms in hand may strike us as somewhat laughable, but why? Why is that any more laughable than people who have *never* been shepherds all parading around holding staffs? These are symbols, after all, symbols of God's divine care and grace.

The woman in Jesus' parable has lost something so precious she cannot rest or give up. Can you see her searching diligently through her house? She lifts up the table cloth. She

searches through the closets. She checks her drawers. She sweeps the floors. It's so precious she can't bear to lose it. And so she won't accept defeat.

This is such a relatable story because we all, at some time or another, have lost something precious or important to us. Maybe our car keys. Maybe a family heirloom. Maybe a wallet or a purse. Maybe a child in the grocery store. When have you lost something so valuable to you that you couldn't give up looking for it?

Tim and I lost our wedding rings moments before we were scheduled to walk down the aisle to get married. As you might imagine, we panicked. But fortunately, they were found in time. They had slipped out of Tim's pocket and fallen between the couch cushions when he sat on a church sofa. A few years later, Tim's ring slipped off his finger in the shower and he thought it was gone for sure. But again, it was fortunately found in the shower drain. Sometimes you get lucky and the lost item is found. The woman in our parable finds her precious item and is so overjoyed she throws a great party.

But of course, Jesus isn't telling this story about the material items we misplace or lose in our lives. Jesus is telling this story about people—about lost people. Now, losing a person we love to death is a great sadness. But perhaps even more tragic is losing a person we love while they are yet living.

A family I grew up with in church had twin daughters a little bit older than me and my twin sister. When they entered their teen and young adult years, one of the twins struggled with significant drug addiction and mental health issues. And one day, one day she just left. The family never had any word from her again, and their efforts to find her proved futile. And she was lost to them.

Imagine the pain. Maybe this is a pain you know in your life. Maybe someone you care about is lost to you. And when someone we care about is lost, those who care about them can find *themselves* lost—lost in a world of pain, and blame, and guilt, and sorrow, and helplessness.

And so now we can understand the woman in the parable who refuses to give up searching. In the story she is looking for a lost coin. But really, Jesus means for us to understand that woman with the broom is God, our mother, searching, not for a coin, but for her precious child who is lost, her precious child who is in trouble and in need.

Remember that Jesus tells this parable in response to criticism he has received by some of the upstanding religious leaders who didn't like the way Jesus was socializing with sinners. These religious leaders had divided society into categories: the good people and the bad people. And as these leaders understood things, the bad people should be excluded and rejected. In other words, they should remain lost to decent, righteous, upstanding members of society.

Jesus tells this story to reveal that *no one* is lost to the love of God. No one. God never gives up on any of us. We, on the other hand, we tend to give up on people all the time. The easiest ones to give up on are the folks we don't like. We can easily put these people in a category that lies beyond our caring about them.

Our society also gives up on people. We give up on the poor or disadvantaged when society chooses to put our resources into other places. We give up on the mentally ill. We give up on people from communities that threaten us in some way--like refugees from certain parts of the world. When someone is our enemy, it is easier to give up on them--to cease to think about them as a human being or to care about their welfare. As a society we give up on children when we won't support affordable child care or health care or safe housing or equal educational resources for all. We let them be lost to the inequalities of this world.

Sometimes, try as we may, we truly don't know how to help the ones who are lost. We may struggle to know how to help those dealing with addictions or mental illness, those lost to anger or bitterness, those lost to their own greed or pride, but we may face the reality of our human limitations. Sometimes there are people we really don't know how to help—but it's not for a want of trying. And tragically, we know people who, at least on this side of the grave, never find the healing they need, never succeed in emerging from their own personal darkness.

But we never should doubt the love or determination of the woman with the broom. God's love for her lost and precious children is unshakable. And since everyone is precious to God, we must regard one another similarly and honor everyone's humanity and worth. We must strive as a society and as individuals to offer care and compassion so that no one is forsaken.

Of course, the parable about the woman with the broom beckons us to consider something else. What if that woman with the broom is searching for you? Or for me? In what ways are we lost--because we all get lost. Maybe you can recall a time when you were lost in some way but then were restored to a path that brought greater wholeness than the one you had been on. Inside of us are bits and pieces of ourselves that our lost and sometimes feel beyond our ability to find again: perhaps our anger or fear or insecurity; maybe feelings of hatred or shame, or our attachment to possessions and the need to succeed by the world's standards. There are these bits and pieces of ourselves that get lost from us. Sometimes, like those religious leaders Jesus was addressing, sometimes our own self-righteousness and hatred of others and dismissal of the disadvantaged reveals how truly lost we are.

But there is the One with the broom who not only searches for us while we are lost, but who sweeps the corners of our hearts and souls in an effort to restore us to wholeness. Jesus

himself, standing there telling this parable, was the embodiment of a God who doesn't give up on us. God saw our lostness and, through Jesus, God came to find us.

She keeps searching for you and for me with a mother's love because we are extremely valuable to her. *All* of us—the CEO and the drug addict, the terrorist bomber and the shop-a-holic who is deep in credit card debt. The hope we have is in the One who will not abandon us to our lostness, but who loves her children with a fierceness that will not give up on us, even when we give up on ourselves. She will not even give us up to the lostness of the grave, but through her love she will even triumph over death. No one is ever lost from the love of God. And so in our great need we pray, "Holy Mother, come find us." Amen.