

Lost, Found & Celebrated

Luke 15:1-10

You know, I think sometimes when we hear Bible stories that include people labelled as “sinners,” we can instinctively keep them at arm’s length. Not because we think they’re terrible or undeserving of grace, but because, if we’re honest, we don’t always see ourselves in them.

We hear “sinner,” and our minds jump to the obvious offenders—people who have engaged in corruption, who have shown a deep lack of empathy, who’ve made choices we wouldn’t make, or who’ve ended up in situations we hope we never will. And most of us, I would guess, don’t really walk around thinking of ourselves in that category. We’re just... trying our best, right? We try to do what’s right, be kind to people, stay faithful, take care of what’s in front of us—whether that’s our work, our family, our neighbours, or our community. We don’t claim perfection. But we’re not intentionally doing harm either.

So when Luke tells us that Jesus was hanging out with “sinners and tax collectors,” it can feel like he’s talking about a group that doesn’t quite include us. But let’s pause for a moment and look a little closer at who these people were.

In Jesus’ time, the word “sinner” wasn’t just a vague label for someone who’d messed up once or twice. It referred to people whose reputations were publicly damaged—people the whole community had basically written off. Tax collectors, for instance, weren’t just disliked; they were seen as traitors, profiting from their own people while working for the oppressive Roman Empire. That wasn’t a small thing.

Others were labelled “sinners” not because of wrongdoing, but because of things we now understand differently like illness, disability, and mental health struggles. But back then, if you were blind, or paralyzed, or showed signs of mental distress, people assumed you—or maybe even your family—had sinned. It sounds harsh, but that’s how people made sense of suffering. There wasn’t the understanding, yet, that these things could be caused by genetic issues or trauma or just by accident. So the label “sinner” wasn’t always about bad behaviour. It was often about exclusion. About being misunderstood. About being judged for things beyond your control. In short, “sinner” was a label the community put on people they considered broken or unworthy. And it was never a secret. Whatever the reason, their lostness was visible.

On the flip side, we have the “righteous.” That’s the word Jesus uses in today’s parables. These were the people who believed they were doing things right—following religious laws, staying faithful, keeping their community and their culture intact. In our story today, they are represented by the Pharisees and scribes. As they saw it, they were the guardians of Jewish religion and culture. They were the religious leaders, the teachers, the people doing their best to preserve a faith and a way of life in the face of Roman rule and pressure to assimilate. Things that might seem over-the-top to us—like questions about exactly what to wear or how to wash one’s hands—weren’t just about being picky. They were about survival, identity, holding on to something sacred in a world that felt like it was spinning out of control. Which isn’t so hard to imagine given our current times.

So when they see Jesus not just speaking to sinners, but eating with them—sharing a table, extending dignity—it throws them off. To them, repentance meant a dramatic turnaround, and in their minds, that wasn’t going to happen over dinner. Sharing a meal meant friendship. Acceptance. And it looked like Jesus was condoning sin, not confronting it.

So, it’s within this context that Jesus tells a couple parables. And, at first, it seems that Jesus has narrowed in on some lost things—a lost sheep, and a lost coin. He begins his first parable by asking his listeners—both the sinners and the righteous—to put themselves into the place of a shepherd. “Which of you” he asks, “after losing one of your one hundred sheep, wouldn’t leave the 99 to find the one? And, after finding it, which of you wouldn’t rejoice and hold a party to celebrate with neighbours and friends?”

Which of you? At first, this feels relatable. We’ve all lost things that matter—our keys, a wallet, reading glasses. Maybe we feel a surge of relief when we find them. But do we throw a party? Probably not. Even if we find something deeply valuable—say a wedding ring or a treasured heirloom—we may share the news, express our joy, maybe even offer a prayer of gratitude. But throwing a party for one lost coin? That’s not how we typically respond.

And yet, these parables make it seem normal to celebrate. The shepherd leaves all 99 of his other sheep to find the one. And upon restoring it to the flock, calls his friends and neighbours to join in celebration. The woman loses a tenth of her wealth and stays up all night searching for her lost coin. That doesn’t seem too unusual. But then she also calls together her friends and neighbours to celebrate, perhaps spending as much on

the celebration as she gained in recovering the lost coin. Again, not such a normal or typical response to finding what was lost.

And, while we may not have recognized it at the start, this is, in fact, the point. Jesus is showing us something about the character of God—about the wildly disproportionate joy God feels when someone who is lost is found. This is what the Pharisees and scribes were missing as they grumbled away about Jesus and the people he shared a meal with: that grace doesn't wait at the finish line. Grace runs out to meet you. It doesn't show up after you've proven yourself. It shows up first.

And maybe, before we rush to critique the Pharisees and scribes, we should pause to acknowledge this: they weren't trying to be the bad guys in this story. They weren't setting out to resist grace or squash joy. Like many of us, they were trying to do the right thing. They were holding the line, keeping the faith, protecting what mattered most to them. They weren't perfect, but they were trying. Just like we are.

Because isn't that the truth for so many of us? We're just trying to get it right. Trying to be good people. Trying to do what we think God wants. Trying to hold our families together. Trying to manage our emotions, our responsibilities, our griefs, our fears. To keep going.

And yet, even in all that effort, even when we are doing our best, we can still be lost. Not because we've done something obviously wrong, but because somewhere along the way, we've lost ourselves.

Jesus tells these parables not just to highlight the visibly lost—the sinners and outcasts everyone could point to—but to gently suggest that the “righteous” might be lost too. Because being lost doesn't always look dramatic. Sometimes, it looks ordinary.

Might the person who always says “yes” out of fear of disappointing others be lost?
Might the parent who gives everything to their children but can no longer remember who they are be lost?

Might the immigrant, caught between two cultures, be lost?

Might the young adult buried by student debt be lost?

Might the man who was taught to stay strong and silent be lost?

Might the woman who wonders if her worth is tied only to her appearance be lost?

Might the person constantly scrolling, endlessly consuming, hoping to feel something real, be lost?

Might the activist burning with passion but slowly burning out be lost?

Might the elder who feels invisible in a world that doesn't seem to need their wisdom be lost?

We may not carry the labels that others see—"sinner," "outcast," "failure"—but if we're honest, many of us still know the ache of being lost. And that ache doesn't disqualify us from grace. That ache doesn't disqualify us from God's love. In fact, it's the very thing God responds to. That part of us that feels disoriented, disconnected, or forgotten—that's the part God seeks out.

When God looks at us, God isn't calculating what we've done right or wrong. God sees *who we are*. It's relational, not judgemental. And who we are matters. Our identity—our belovedness—is deeper than our successes or failures.

These parables aren't just for the broken. They're also for the faithful. They are an invitation: not to feel ashamed, but to be found. Because here's the thing: while the Pharisees and scribes expected the sinners to repent—to change their hearts and embrace a new perspective that centred on God, on faithfulness, on religious law—their good intentions don't align with what God wants for each of us. God doesn't wait for you to have everything figured out. And God's grace doesn't require a perfect map or a flawless track record. God meets us in our lostness. And then throws a party when we find our way home.

But for that to happen we have to stop pretending we're not lost. We have to admit it. You and me both. Confide your hopes and fears, your dreams and dashed hopes, to God. Tell the truth about your confusion, your exhaustion, your anger, your longing. God is seeking to meet you in that place. Turn around and you'll find God is already there. And when you're found there will be joy. Not judgment, celebration. Not shame, rejoicing. Not a lecture, a feast. God seeks to forgive and restore.

But this message goes even deeper. Jesus shared these parables as a way to help the religious leaders open their eyes and hearts to the ways in which they, as members of the community, could invite and welcome. When we think back to those 99 sheep that the shepherd left as he sought out the lost one, we might wonder how those 99, left on their own might have felt: abandoned? Less important? Stuck waiting?

Or... what if they were being entrusted with something holy? To be part of the search. To make sure no one among them feels lost in plain sight. What if they—we—saw past the appearance of strength in others and listened for the quiet signs of lostness? What if we noticed the tiredness in the most reliable people and brought them rest instead of

more responsibility? What if the church was known as a place where even tired saints get refreshed? Where the righteous can admit they're lost? Where no one has to pretend?

As a community we are called to open our doors and rejoice. This is the upside-down nature of God's kingdom: when what was lost is found, we celebrate. Loudly. Joyfully. Because that joy doesn't just restore the one who was lost—it revives all of us.

Ultimately, this parable isn't just about sinners or saints, or even about being lost and found. It's about a God so wildly in love with God's children that God will stop at nothing to find us. God searches and sweeps, waits and watches, unceasing, until we're all caught up in mercy, grace, and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.