

A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian
Trinity Episcopal Church
14 September 2025
Exodus 32:1, 7-14; Psalm 51:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

“Lost and Found”

A lost sheep, a lost coin, and the joy experienced when they are found. In creating parables, Jesus illustrates the stuff of truth by looking to his first-century world for inspiration – a sower with seed, an oil lamp, a mustard seed. Those parables are still priceless, but as I read today’s Gospel, I wondered about *our* everyday world and where *we* might look for such inspiration.

I thought about a hospital.

Across my career, I have worked in hospitals – as a psychology intern, a spiritual care associate, and as a pediatric chaplain – but my relationship with hospitals began much earlier, when I was a young girl and my father was gravely ill.

From my 5-year-old perspective, Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, perched on the high cliffs of the Hudson River, was like a shining castle on a hill, a haven of safety, and welcome. Considered that way, a hospital can be a sacred place, because no matter what has been done or left undone in this life, people enter that space acknowledging that all is not well, that *they* are not well, seeking second chances and healing. Those from every walk of life, with entirely different views, values, politics, and beliefs, find themselves equally welcome in a place dedicated to their health and wholeness.

On the Surgery floor, a 60-year-old awakens to find his 85-year-old father at the bedside. The son has caused a fair bit of trouble over the years and the father has made his share of mistakes. But no matter how rocky the road between them, they keep seeking reconciliation and they refuse to give up on each other.

In Intensive Care, a young man is alone, having broken ties with family and friends. His nurse provides more than medical care, but offers the comfort of compassionate presence, encouraging him not to give up on himself, as she will not give up on him.

In the billing office, a clerk struggles to balance a patient’s treatment needs against an unforgiving corporate policy and a massive tangle of bureaucratic red tape. She pledges her best to sort it out, refusing to give up on it.

And then there is the cafeteria, so full of human stories and activity. A homeless person looking to escape the cold weather is given a sandwich from a staff member’s own tray. A doctor who treated a gunshot victim thanks the one who treated the shooter. Staff chaplains, identified by the garb of their varied traditions – yarmulke, head scarf, bonnet, turban, collar – push their tables together in order to share a meal.

It would be so much easier for these folks to dash in, eat quickly, and head back to their units, but this is an opportunity for community conversation and they will not give it up.

A typical hospital, yes, but also a modern-day parable for the Kingdom of God.

Of course, we could also be talking about a school, a corporation, a government office, a local shop, even a village church – any place which, at its highest and best, reflects that Kingdom – a commitment to presence, conversation, reconciliation...from not giving up.

A very different picture from the one painted in today's Gospel...

...where the Pharisees and scribes sneer at Jesus for his willingness to share a meal with so-called sinners – those considered beneath them. Why would he break bread with them? Why does he not judge them as unworthy? Why does he care if these *others* find their way or not? Why will he not condemn and cut them off? Why not just give up?

In response, Jesus does what he so often does – he poses a question:

*Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them,
does not leave the ninety-nine and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?
And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices*

Jesus challenges his listeners to widen their thinking and open their hearts – to value each member of the human flock, to seek reconciliation with those outside our own circle, refusing to give up on the lost and rejoicing when we are found together.

And lest we think that we are always the finders, we would be wise to remember that sometimes we are among the lost. We *all* need our thinking opened and our hearts widened. To ponder what we have done and left undone in this life requires honesty, insight, and guts, because the path to redemption can be deeply humbling.

Frankly, not every one will find themselves able or willing to choose that path. But when we do, we will find the grace of second chances, the promise of personal and community healing, and, according to today's Gospel, there will be rejoicing, both human and divine.

...like that elder parent at the bedside of his son, the nurse comforting his patient, the clerk trying to make wrong things right, and all the acts of goodness in that busy, diverse cafeteria. No matter the circles in which we live and move and find our being, we are called to do as Jesus did, like those chaplains did – pushing our separate tables together in conversation with those who look, think, speak, and worship differently than us.

And if we face insults or sneers, as he did, we can take strength in knowing that we are trying to honor the great commandment – love of God by love of neighbor – by refusing to give up on the hope of reconciliation. And when we do, then a parable *about* the Kingdom of God *becomes* the Kingdom of God, who will truly and finally rejoice...for never having given up on *us*.

Amen.