

Luke 15:1-10      Things Lost  
September 14, 2025

The last time this gospel text came up as the reading for the day, the title of the sermon was, “Things Found.” In my weekly search for good titles, which every so often descends into the search for a merely acceptable title, and even sometimes into a search just for a title, I noticed the cart before the horse appearance of these words.

They, I am sure, were used to good purpose, but at a distance, look as though they have diminished the power of the parables because the emphasis is placed upon the finding of things, before their losing, which is a necessary precursor if finding is going to be meaningful. Thus, today’s title, whether good, or merely acceptable, or just a, title, “Things Lost.”

The 15th chapter of Luke is the chapter of the lost and found. Whenever I see a reference to it, I think of the great parable, perhaps the greatest of all the parables, but one *not* read in our hearing today, The Parable of the Lost Son . . . The Prodigal. I checked to see if it would show up as the gospel text for next week, which it does not, so I do not hesitate to mention it now.

The chapter begins with a story about a shepherd who lost one lamb; and then moves to a, “parable,” about a woman who lost a coin, but it doesn’t take long to get to the point, the telling of a story about the loss of

a person. Or really two people, for the two brothers were both lost in their own way.

Of course, in all three of the stories, the things lost *do* turn into things found; so there is not only distress about the precious value of the things we lose from time-to-time, but also the relief and joy of the finding, which is meant to serve as a metaphor of life with God. Our attention is drawn to the celebration.

In the grand scheme of God’s design, this losing and finding is a part of the plan; Paul, one of the great interpreters of the Christ story and its meaning in scripture, put it this way, “The whole creation was subjected to futility, in hope . . . that the creation itself would be liberated from its bondage to decay, and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.”

The first two stories serve as illustrations of smaller examples of a larger truth, that meaning in life depends upon whether we are numbered among the lost and found.

Perhaps it was the way things were here, I am not sure, but in the tradition of my upbringing, the language of lostness was very prominent. Preachers were always referring to, “the lost.” Interestingly, the opposite of lostness was savedness; the lost got saved . . . it seems a mixing of ideas . . . the dying get saved, the lost *get found*. It is not an important point.

But I always felt it was told in such a way that I did not really associate myself with the lost, that was other people. I was securely in the found category.

It also became for me so associated with high-pressure evangelism strategies that in my general references to Christian anthropology, I have not often used the term. But one can be sure that if it is out of style to use it, “lostness,” is an apt word to describe the human condition.

We are lost; we are losing each other; at various times we have all lost our way; our *selves*. In the pursuit of earthly life and its attachments, we have lost a sense of ourselves in Christ, in relation to God. Lostness is a part of the way things are.

In the gospel, the sequence builds to the story of the lost person and that is what these parables are essentially about; lost people. It is important, at one time or another, for each of us, even if we have, as I did, childhood professions of faith on which to fall back; to see *ourselves* as one of the lost things.

If we fail to carry that idea with us throughout life, there are dangers; one of which is to set ourselves up as distinct from others in the world who have not acknowledged themselves to be lost and found, and to set ourselves above them in our minds because we *have* made that acknowledgement. The result can be a form of spiritual pride. We are not merely those who have been found, but among those who have been

*lost* and found. Lostness should be a source of humility.

Setting the dangers aside, let us contemplate the ways in which people generally, but more specifically believers, can lose themselves. Certainly there is the pre-occupation with other things. Many of the other things are good, but fail when they are made the center of our lives;

family, vocation, church and religion, citizenship and party affiliation, avocation, and self-betterment. All of these things are good, but distortions are created when they become the main thing rather than a part of a life grounded in God. We may think of these as “older brother” types of problems.

Then, of course, self pursuits; when we make our own well-being the highest aim of life. These can happen in subtle, or not so subtle ways. Food, sex, recreation, money, and things; which can also be seen as basically good properly pursued, kept in place, yet are problematic when given a too high of a place in life. Sometimes these look like “younger brother” problems, as if they represent the highest meaning of our lives.

The sneakyness of all these good things comes from the fact that they function basically the same way. They end up being attempts at a human attempt to solve a problem only God can solve. Bad religion, for instance, comes when religion is mistaken as an end instead of a means, considered necessary for

salvation instead of a guide to the acceptance of the grace that has been given. It is assigned more significance than it deserves.

Sometimes we use words like legalism or works righteousness, but whatever we call it, It is not to be identified with any of the particular religion, but, with, “self-saving attempts in every religion or life endeavor (Tillich). Family or work, money or pleasure are not evil in themselves, but become evil when unrealistic expectations are placed on them, when too much of our identity is taken from them. It becomes a thing lost.

Enough about things lost. The truth of the gospel is that in the searching for lost things we are found. And we are found in the middle of our lives to be in the presence of the living God, maker of heaven and earth; merciful and kind, strong and compassionate, in whom we are not only found, but find ourselves.

It is sublime. Sometimes we appreciate what we have better after loss and rediscovery.

It is necessary to say that when we are found, we find ourselves loved and cherished, forgiven and reconciled, comforted and strengthened, encouraged. But what is so very noticeable about all three of these stories is the way God is presented, not only as merciful and compassionate, kind and all the rest; but as celebrating the finding -

In Frederick Buechner’s way of expressing things about the Prodigal story, “they kill the fatted calf, break out the best scotch, roll back the living room carpet and ring up the neighbors,” *They begin to make merry*. That is the King James Version’s way of putting it. Merry like Christmas.

What an expression? Because:

Things lost became things found.  
The sick have been made well,  
the dead have been brought back to life.

I have to admit that I am not much of a partyer, never have been. A celebration for me is a long walk without anything much on my mind; it is a new book to read or world championship track meet to watch on Peacock. My idea of a party doesn’t cut it much with most people, and that is okay with me.

But there you have it - It is the meaning of the gospel, it is the theology of the church, it is the point of it all. Things lost becoming things found.

Here is a little spiritual exercise. The next time you lose something, think of these parables; the little lamb, the coin, the prodigal himself and his brother. And if you find it later, when you do, think of the coin and the lamb and the sons, and the celebration in heaven, and at the very least, let it make you smile.

## Acts 8

26 But an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south[a] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert road.  
27 And he rose and went. And behold, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a minister of the Can'dace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure, had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."  
30 So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "How can I, unless some one guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was this:

"As a sheep led to the slaughter  
or a lamb before its shearer is dumb,  
so he opens not his mouth.

33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken up from the earth."

34 And the eunuch said to Philip, "*About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about some one else?*" 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus. 36 And as they went along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, *here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?*"  
38 And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they

both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39 And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip was found at Azo'tus, and passing on he preached the gospel to all the towns till he came to Caesare'a.

## Isaiah 53:7-8

. . . like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb,  
so he opened not his mouth.  
8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away;  
and as for his generation, who considered  
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of my people?

## Deuteronomy 23:1

"He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord.

## Isaiah 56:1-8

Thus says the Lord:

"Keep justice, and do righteousness,  
for soon my salvation will come,  
and my deliverance be revealed.  
2 Blessed is the man who does this,  
and the son of man who holds it fast,

who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it,  
and keeps his hand from doing any evil.”

3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,  
“The Lord will surely separate me from his people”;  
and let not the eunuch say,  
“Behold, I am a dry tree.”

4 For thus says the Lord:  
“To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,  
5 I will give in my house and within my walls  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
which shall not be cut off.

6 “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,  
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,  
and to be his servants,  
every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not  
profane it,  
and holds fast my covenant—  
7 these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples.

8 Thus says the Lord God,  
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,  
I will gather yet others to him  
besides those already gathered.”

“Is he talking about himself or someone else?”

“What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

Obviously this story is told in the context of the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, and it comes as a way of knowing that the rest of the world seeks salvation, and there is not reason not to accept them.

Last week, it was, “I want to see.”

This week, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

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