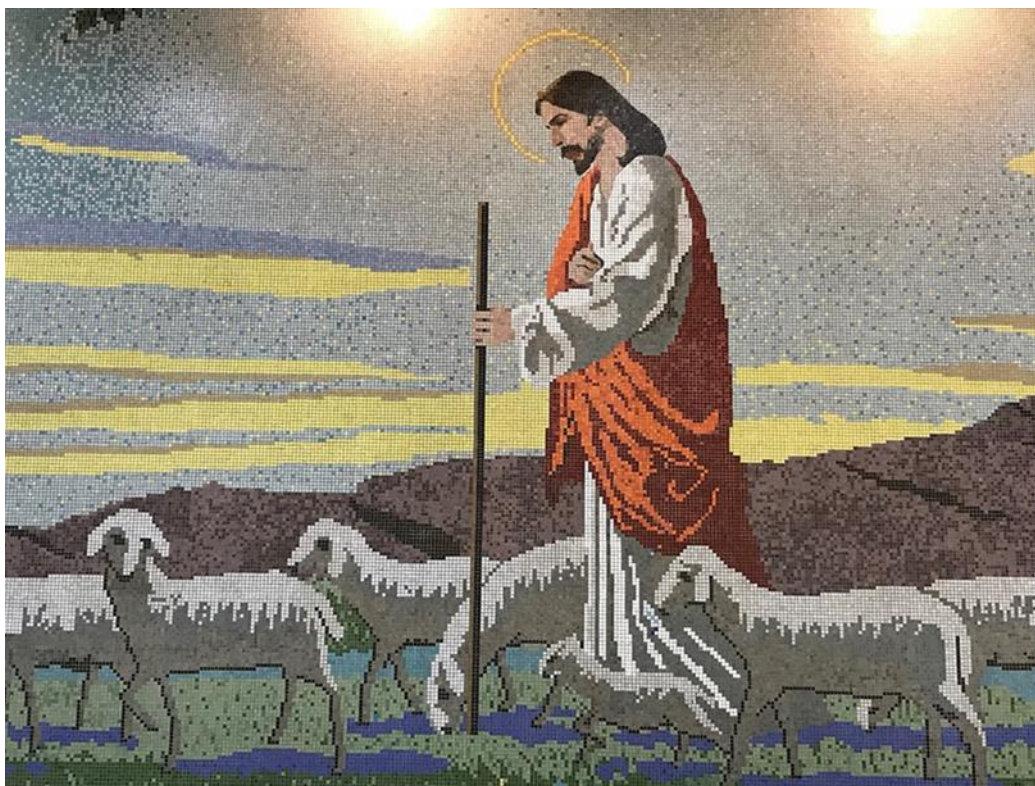




The Misfits & Marginalized
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; March 30, 2025
 4th Sunday in Lent
 Luke 15:1-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” The outsiders, the misfits, the marginalized—they draw near to Jesus. We cannot help but wonder why. Maybe they hear the good news in his teaching. Maybe they hear an invitation to the table of grace. The Pharisees and the scribes draw near to Jesus, too, but their response is quite different. They grumble. They point fingers at Jesus and his pack of sinners because they cannot comprehend how someone thought to be a holy man would risk his reputation welcoming and eating with riffraff.

Jesus recognizes the need for a teaching moment, so he tells the crowd gathered around not one—not two—but three stories. First there is a certain shepherd who leaves 99 sheep alone in the wilderness to go searching for one sheep that is lost. Then there is a woman who loses a coin and searches for it into the wee hours of the night until she finds it. Finally, there is a father who kills the fatted calf to celebrate the return of his wayward son.

Three parables about the lost and the found—three parables about extravagant grace—three parables about us. After all, what has been lost, if not us? We are the lost ones and something crucial in us needs to be found.ⁱ

On our spiritual journey through Lent, what difference does it make to hear the tales of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the Prodigal Son? Perhaps more than any other church season, Lent can help us see the “lost-ness” of all the characters in Jesus’ teaching. Spent rightly, Lent can help us see why we do the things we do. What is it that truly motivates us? We may notice things in our lives that result in broken relationships, suspicion, or an unwillingness to admit our mistakes. Hopefully, we will recognize our total dependence on God—our need to be near Christ, our Lord.ⁱⁱ

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

As Christians we realize we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The writer of the Gospel of Luke understands a “sinner,” as someone who has a habit of sinning—so much so the entire community knows about it. “Righteous,” on the other hand, is less about perfection and more about actively trying to live by God’s law of love. So, when Jesus welcomes the untouchables and ne’er-do-wells, he welcomes the morally disgraceful and outcast. He accepts and befriends them to the point of embarrassment and the decent folks are more than a little concerned.

The parables, at first glance, seem easy enough to understand—and that should be our first clue. Because Jesus’ teachings are rarely “easy.” Instead, he is more likely to leave us scratching our heads and wondering if we really understand him at all. “Which of you,” Jesus begins, “Which of you doesn’t go out to look for a sheep that is lost?” Sounds reasonable — since looking after the sheep is the shepherd’s job. But what about putting 99 sheep at risk? What about leaving them in the wilderness with no protection — to seek out only one that is lost? And when he finds the lost sheep, he calls together his friends to celebrate. How interesting!

Then there is the woman who loses a tenth of her wealth. She sweeps, sweeps, sweeps, and searches all night until she finds her lost coin. Then she calls together her neighbors and invites them to celebrate with her. But a celebration—doesn’t that generally involve providing food and drink for guests? Won’t she spend a significant portion of the coin she recovers on the festivities? Well, that hardly seems practical!

Finally, a son who has wronged his father and lost his inheritance on decadent living ends up in a distant land starving to death. When he comes to his senses, he sets off toward home with a plan. He will admit his sin to his father and ask to be taken on as a hired hand. But before the son sets foot in his father’s house — before he even has a chance to say he’s sorry — he finds himself wrapped in the strong arms of his father’s embrace. How surprising?

Jesus says there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. But what does it mean to repent? Repentance involves a change in perspective; a mending of one's ways; a turning from one way of living to another. No doubt, these are stories of repentance — wonderful stories. But as I pondered them, I could not help but notice the greater story woven throughout them — the story of God's extravagant love. It is beyond comprehension. God loves us so much God will stop at nothing to save us. And God will celebrate — host a party with all the angels — over one of us — just one of us — who is no longer lost — but found.

*What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul!
 What wondrous love is this, O my soul!
 What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of bliss
 to bear the dreadful curse for my soul, for my soul,
 to bear the dreadful curse for my soul?*

Most of us try very hard to do the right thing and be good Christians. If so, we may feel *less* like wretched sinners and *more* than a little righteous. Yet isn't it true that dark things creep into our lives in unexpected ways — anxiety, fear, greed, selfishness, arrogance, jealousy, anger?

*When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down,
 when I was sinking down, sinking down;
 when I was sinking down beneath God's righteous frown,
 Christ laid aside his crown for my soul, for my soul,
 Christ laid aside his crown for my soul.*

Although we are a people made right by God's grace, we may still feel lost sometimes. If that is the case, we are in good company and church is just the place for us to meet. Here we can be honest about our lostness. We can share our hopes and dreams as well as our fears and disappointments. And here we can be reminded that whenever one of us turns toward God for any reason, God is ready and waiting to throw a party — eager to celebrate with the angels.

*To God and to the Lamb, I will sing, I will sing,
 to God and to the Lamb, I will sing;
 to God and to the Lamb who is the great I AM -
 while millions join the theme, I will sing, I will sing;
 while millions join the theme, I will sing.*

In the end, the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son are not ultimately about sinners or the righteous. They are not even about being lost and found. They are about a God so much in love with God's children that God will do anything to find them. To find us. How

then shall we live? Will we live with repentant hearts? Will we live as grateful recipients of God's love, mercy, and grace? Will we go out of our way to share the good news of salvation made possible through Christ?

Which of you, Jesus asks, would go to such lengths to search and to find? Which of you would take such measures to welcome back and then celebrate? In all honesty, none of us. But God would. God does. God searches hills and valleys longing to bring us home. God loses sleep, lights a lamp, and sweeps, sweeps, sweeps, until we are all returned into the fold of God's loving embrace.

*And when from death I'm free, I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
and when from death I'm free, I'll sing on;
and when from death I'm free, I'll sing and joyful be,
and through eternity, I'll sing on, I'll sing on,
and through eternity I'll sing on.*

ⁱ David E. Ensign @ <http://clarendonsermons.blogspot.com/2016/03/this-ministry-for-this-moment.html?m=1>

ⁱⁱ Karoline Lewis @ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4553>

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