

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*September 11, 2022*

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## Lost & Found & Lost & Found & Lost...

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Much to my dismay we no longer sing our children to sleep at bedtime any more. At some point in the last five or so years they decided they were too old for lullabies. Heartbreaking! I still look back longingly on the years we were able to spend that time with them. When we were singing to them we had a number of songs in rotation that we would use: "Children of the Heavenly Father" was a regular one, as was "This is My Father's World"; but the song we returned to again and again, just about every night, was Amazing Grace. It is such a wonderful hymn! The tune is sing-able and the words...what beautiful lyrics! And they even express decent theology, which can be rare in hymnody!

The composer of Amazing Grace, a guy by the name of John Newton, seemed to understand grace in a very personal way. He understood grace in the way that only someone who has been utterly lost can understand it. If you don't know the story, John Newton was, for some time, involved in the lucrative Atlantic slave trade of the mid-1700's, even being promised the opportunity to captain his own ship at one point. Then, during a particularly violent storm in 1748CE, he had a spiritual conversation. This eventually led to him leaving the slave trade (and seafaring) altogether and begin studying theology and scripture instead. A few years later he became an avowed abolitionist and was even ordained as a priest in the Church of England.

Just imagine how lost he must have felt during that storm! But not just then! I suspect he felt lost again when he began to study God's word and realized what he had participated in with regard to the slave trade. Was it one of those experiences of lostness that led to the lyric, "I once was lost, but now am found"? Or was it something else? Who knows? But John clearly new lostness.

Do you know lostness? Have you ever felt like you just didn't know who you were or what you were supposed to be doing? Have you ever felt as though you didn't have direction in life? Or purpose? Have you ever looked around at your life and wondered how you got to where you are? Those are all elements of lostness. It's a distressing experience, isn't it? It is certainly a lonely one.

Jesus knew lostness during his life and ministry. I'm not sure how often he experienced it, but he clearly had some experiences of it. Certainly his language in the garden of Gethsemane would indicate a lost sort of feeling. Why else would he pray "remove this cup from me"<sup>1</sup>? Or why would some of his last words be "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me"<sup>2</sup>? While the witness of scripture might suggest that these experiences were uncommon for Jesus, it sure seems as though the experiences of lostness he had were particularly distressing.

What a powerful element of the Incarnation, to know that just as we have experienced lostness, so too has God's only Son! The promise of the Incarnation, the promise of Emmanuel or God-with-us, is that God knows what the human experience is like. And not only does God know what it's like, but God has even experienced it in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is out of this Incarnational experience of humanity that Christ shares these two parables about lostness. Christ knows what it means to be lost, and out of that experience he seeks to spare others from that pain. Christ knows the vital importance of relationships and community and out of that knowledge Christ constantly seeks to restore people to relationships and community. Christ knows the despair of being lost and alone, and out of divine love and grace he seeks wholeness for all people.

One of the things that strikes me about these two parables is that in both what is lost already belonged. The lost sheep was already a member of the flock, under the care of the shepherd. The lost coin belonged to the woman before it disappeared. Scripture teaches us that every person that was, is, and will be are made in the image of God. We are stamped with God's signature. We all belong to God, just as that sheep belonged in the flock and

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 22:42; Matthew 26:39; Mark 14:36 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34 (NRSV)

under the shepherd's care; and just as the coin always belonged to the woman.

And not only do all people belong to God, but God loves and cares for all people. Again and again in his ministry we find Jesus intentionally, lovingly, reaching out to those who had been pushed to the outskirts by society. He regularly sought out the lost and lonely, the despised and marginalized. That's even how our Gospel text today begins: "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him."<sup>3</sup> What a bunch of lost people!

Jesus then calls out the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees and scribes. He claims lost people in these parables and teaches of the powerful joy that comes from restoring wholeness of community. He shows those who would be followers of his Way that they are to prioritize seeking those in the midst of lostness and work to restore them to community.

You know what it's like to be lost. But what about the other end of the experience? How does it feel to be found? Does being found show you that you were missed? That your presence in community is valuable? Does someone seeking you when you're lost help you to understand that you...just as you are...are vital to community? What would it be like if we intentionally went out to seek the lost? Who might we discover? What community might we build?

I wonder if we might find the joy that Jesus expects us to find if we centered reconciliation and restoration to community as priorities for our calling as a community of faith. And, let's be honest, this is vital work of healing love and grace. There are a lot of lost people in the world. And even if most people aren't lost right now, they will likely experience lostness at some point. They might even be found only to get lost again right away.

But the shepherd doesn't care about any of that. If anyone who bears the image of God is lost, then the Way of Christ means going out looking for them...again and again if we have to. Why? Because that person belongs to God...that person belongs in healthy and loving community. That person carries a spark of the divine, a perspective and experience of life that our community needs in order to be whole.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 15:1 (NRSV)

John Newton was lost but found...probably numerous times in his life. I suspect each of us here has been lost and found and lost and found numerous times in our lives too. And what grace it is that we have a God who is stubborn and constant in seeking us. What powerful love must motivate God to pursue the lost, no matter how lost they are or how often they flee the flock or are forced out of it by the differently lost. There is grace upon grace to be found in these parables. Grace upon grace for the lost and for the found. Ultimately, these parables are centered on the joy of connection and community. They show us the amazing grace of a persistently lost-people-seeking God! Amen.