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“Who Counts?”

Luke 15:1-10

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Luke 15:1-10. ¹Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

⁸ ‘Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’

Our stories today in the Gospel of Luke are known as the Parable of the Lost Sheep or the Parable of the Good Shepherd and the Parable of the Lost Coin.

A parable is a simple story that asks us to think about very important matters: our relationships with others, our place in the world, how we can be better disciples.



In the Christian tradition, people often understand parables as allegories. For example, many consider the sheep and the coin to represent repentant sinners; and the man who seeks the lost sheep or the woman who searched high and low for the coin are symbols for God.

I have often interpreted them this way. But I want us to consider an additional understanding—that these stories are meant to tell us something about counting, about searching for what is missing, and celebrating becoming whole again.

Feeling like we matter is important. Think about a time when you felt that you mattered. What happened? How did it make you feel?

I am willing to bet that your moment of mattering made a difference to you. Most likely, you felt important because of what someone *else* said or did.

Dr. Zach Mercurio is a psychologist and researcher who writes that feeling significant is a basic human desire and a critical factor for mental, emotional, and physical well-being in life, work, and school.

Mattering, he says, is also dependent on others. In the same way that others help you feel like *you* matter, you in turn help others around you know that *they* matter.

On his blog, Dr. Mercurio shares the story of a woman named Jane. Just one sentence changed her perception of herself and her job.

For years, Jane had hopped around from one cleaning job to the next in what she described as a difficult life. After a family member she was caring for passed away, she knew she had to get a more stable job to survive. That led her to take a custodial job at the university where Dr. Mercurio teaches. When interviewing Jane for a study on what makes work meaningful, he asked her, “Why did you stay?”

Jane replied that in her first training on the job, a supervisor pulled out the dictionary and defined the word *custodian* for her as “a person who has responsibility for or looks after something.”

Despite being told her whole life that cleaning was an unskilled and dirty job, she said, “realizing I was looking after these buildings and everyone in them changed my belief patterns and inspired me for the last eighteen years. I finally realized that I mattered.”

Researchers find mattering is the feeling that we’re a significant part of the world around us, it’s the belief that we are *noticed, important, and needed*—right now.ⁱⁱ

In 2018, health insurer Cigna surveyed 20,000 Americans and found that 47 percent of respondents reported feeling “forgotten.” I wonder how those results would read after the past two and a half years we’ve been through.



Global surveys of workers find that 43 percent of employees feel “invisible.” A study on over 66,000 students in grades six through 12 revealed that only half of the respondents think their teacher would care if they were absent. Just 46 percent of students said they felt valued at school.ⁱⁱⁱ

Feeling like you matter not only increases a sense of self-worth and motivation, research also finds it reduces the risk of severe depression, anxiety, and can save lives.

Several years ago, a fifth grade teacher looked out at her class at the start of a school year and saw rows of eager, excited faces—well, all except for young Teddy Stoddard, slumped in his seat with a sour expression on his face there in the front row.^{iv} Mrs. Thompson had watched Teddy the year before and noticed that he didn’t play well with the other children, his clothes were messy, and he always seemed to need a bath. And Teddy could be unpleasant. It got to the point where Mrs. Thompson actually took some delight in marking his papers with broad red X’s all over his scribbled answers.

At the end of the first quarter, Mrs. Thompson went back through and reviewed each child’s records from years before at the school. She put off Teddy’s until last. When she finally came to his file, she wasn’t prepared for what she read inside. Teddy’s first grade teacher wrote, “Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh. He does his work neatly and has good manners . . . he is a joy to be around.” His second grade teacher wrote, “Teddy is an excellent student, well-liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother has a terminal illness and life at home must be a struggle.” His third grade teacher wrote, “His mother’s death has been hard on Teddy. He tries to do his best, but his father doesn’t show much interest.”

Teddy’s fourth grade teacher wrote, “Teddy is withdrawn and doesn’t show much interest in school. He doesn’t have many friends and sometimes sleeps in class.” By now, Mrs. Thompson realized the problem. From then on, she paid particular attention to Teddy. She wanted him to know that he mattered to her, that he was important, and that his mind was just as capable as any other student in her class.

Over the months she worked with him, she saw Teddy’s spirit come alive. The more she encouraged him the better he responded. By the end of the year, Teddy wasn’t slouched in the front row any longer. He looked forward to being at school and opened up to his peers around him. Finally, someone had made Teddy feel important, like he mattered.

Luke sets the scene—once again, Jesus is in trouble for hanging out with the wrong people. As “all the tax collectors and sinners” come near to listen to him, the Pharisees and scribes begin to grumble: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

In response, Jesus tells the scandalized religious insiders some parables. In the first, a shepherd leaves his flock of ninety-nine to look for a single lamb that is lost. He searches until he finds it, and when he does, he carries that one lamb home on his shoulders, invites his friends and neighbors over, and throws a party to celebrate.



In the second parable, a woman loses one of her ten silver coins. Immediately, she lights a lamp and sweeps her entire house, looking carefully for the coin until she finds it. Then, like the shepherd, she calls together her friends and neighbors and asks them to celebrate the recovery of the coin: “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”

The shepherd counts the sheep, and that’s the only way he knows one is missing. The woman counts the coins, so that she’s aware when one has been lost.

The truth is that the lost lamb in the first parable belongs to the shepherd’s flock from the very beginning—it is his lamb. In the same way, the coin in the second parable belongs to the woman before she loses it—the coin is one of her very own.

These parables are not about lost outsiders finding salvation and becoming Christians. These parables are about us, the insiders. These are parables about lostness on the inside.

It happens to God’s people. We get lost over and over again, and God finds us over and over again.

What does it mean to be lost? It means we lose our sense of belonging, we lose our capacity to trust, we lose our experience of God’s presence, we lose our sense of self-worth or our will to persevere. Some of us get lost when illness descends on our lives and we feel like God doesn’t care. Some of us get lost when death comes too soon and too suddenly for someone we love, and we experience a crisis of faith. Some of us get lost when our marriages die. Some of us get lost when our children break our hearts. Some of us get lost in the throes of addiction, or anxiety, or bitterness, or hatred. Some of us get lost very close to home—within the very walls of the church.^v

We get so miserably lost that the shepherd has to wander through the craggy wilderness to find us. We get so completely lost that the housewife has to light her lamp, pick up her broom and sweep every corner of her house in order to find out what’s become of us.

Maybe it’s not surprising to you that we get lost. But what should be surprising to us is what these stories tell us of the nature of God. God the searcher, the seeker, the determined finder. God’s not snug in the fold with the ninety-nine insiders. God isn’t curled up on her couch polishing the nine coins she is sure of. God is where the lost things are. God is in the darkness in the wilderness, God is in the remotest corners of the house. God is with the “forgotten” – the overworked and underpaid, the asylum seeker, the man working on his 12 steps, the woman stuck in depression, and the children who don’t feel like anyone would notice if they didn’t show up to school.

And all this means that if we want to find God, we have to seek the lost. We have to *get lost*.

This isn’t easy. For one thing, it’s hard for us to believe we’re worth looking for. That we matter. That we are loved enough to warrant a long, hard, diligent search. And then that God will feel so much joy at our recovery that God will tell the world the good news and throw us all a party.



But this is exactly what Jesus says is true. He shares these stories with folks who can't even reconcile their faith with Jesus' bewildering claim that lostness has its virtues. In her book *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor argues that lostness makes us "stronger at the edges and softer at the center." It teaches us about vulnerability, about empathy, about humility, and about patience. Lostness shows us who we really are and who God really is.

Donald McCullough writes, "Grace tells us that we are accepted just as we are. We may not be the kind of people we want to be, we may be a long way from our goals, we may have more failures than achievement ... but we are nonetheless accepted by God, held in [God's] hands. Such is his promise to us in Jesus Christ, a promise we can trust."^{vi}

"Rejoice with me," Jesus says, "for I have found the sheep that was lost...the coin I had lost." This is the good news. Thanks be to God.

ⁱ Sermon title comes from the children's book *Who Counts?: 100 Sheep, 10 Coins, 2 Sons*, by Amy-Jill Levine and Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, Westminster John Knox Press.

ⁱⁱ Zach Mercurio, "The Science of Mattering: Why Feeling Significant is so Significant," June 17, 2020, <https://www.zachmercurio.com/2020/06/the-science-of-mattering-why-feeling-significant-is-so-significant/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Both of these data reports are shared on Zach Mercurio's blog post "The Art and Science of Noticing Others: How to Become Better at Making People Feel Seen," January 19, 2021, <https://www.zachmercurio.com/2021/01/the-art-and-science-of-noticing-others-how-to-become-better-at-making-people-feel-seen/>.

^{iv} This story is adapted from Director of the Children's Defense Fund, Marian Wright Edelman's "Story of the Year" in 1994: <http://www.pelinks4u.org/articles/inspire/ins102599.htm>.

^v Debie Thomas, "On Lostness," Journey with Jesus, September 8, 2019, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2356-on-lostness>.

^{vi} Dan Clendon, "'Aelwyd a Gymhell': What I Learned in Wales this Summer," Journey with Jesus, September 13, 2013, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20130909JJ.shtml>.

