

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 14, 2025 (Proper 19, Year C)
Luke 15:1-10

I don't know about you, but I've been praying a lot this week. I've shed a lot of tears. Something is broken, something's wrong. There was another political assassination this week. I didn't agree with Charlie Kirk on almost any of his views, but no one deserves to be murdered.

And this was just a couple months after the last political assassination, right here in Minnesota. This isn't who we are. This is America. We're supposed to be better than this.

Just a couple weeks ago, we prayed here in worship for the victims and survivors and our nation after the Annunciation school shooting. There was ANOTHER school shooting THIS week. The SAME day that Kirk died. It was the 100th school shooting JUST THIS YEAR. It's the leading cause of death of children in this country. How can this be?

Some people SAY now that EMPATHY IS WRONG; some CHRISTIANS even say it's a SIN. What?

Something's wrong. This isn't the world we grew up in. This isn't the COUNTRY WE KNEW. We've lost the ability to DISAGREE with CIVILITY. We've lost kindness. We've lost BASIC DECENCY. We JUST FEEL...LOST. Like sheep without a shepherd.

And so, we love to read gospel stories like these – stories of a lost sheep and lost coin, because we know what being LOST FEELS like. There is SOMEONE spending EVERY DAY LOOKING for us, EVERY LAST MOMENT, looking for the VALUE in us, and never stopping until they've found all of it. We have a Savior. And if any Pharisee tries to say we're not WORTH it, he says, "They are to me."

I'm reminded of OTHER searches. I remember the event we had the anniversary of this week – September 11th. Do you remember THAT search? There were hundreds of people searching. Many had been there for days. Some of them worked for 2 or 3 days without quitting. Some of them even worked without gloves or masks. ALL of them risked their lives. All they KNEW was that their brothers and sisters were DOWN there somewhere, lost, and they would have done ANYTHING to find even ONE of those lost ones—just ONE survivor. Just one, and their efforts would have been worth it. And can you imagine how HAPPY they'd have been if they had FOUND a survivor?

There are ECHOES of MORE searches – mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, digging through rubble in Gaza and Ukraine.

How many times in the last few years have we heard stories of parents who watched HELPLESSLY as their children were swept away by raging flood-waters? How would THOSE searchers feel to find a survivor?

(show picture)

How about this mom, running barefoot to the Annunciation school after the shooting? Was her baby safe? was all she could think. How DESPERATE was HER search? That picture was EVERYWHERE on social media, because SHE was EVERY MOM.

At times like these, we feel lost. That's why these parables today are so powerful. Some say it seems OUTRAGEOUS for a shepherd to LEAVE the 99 behind to look for just ONE. They say it seems EXTRAVAGANT for a woman to spend so much time and effort looking for just ONE coin. But not if it's YOURS. You would do ANYTHING, GIVE ANYTHING to FIND them.

I mean, how do you feel when you lose your PHONE? When you lose your keys? Your wallet? Your reading glasses? You are CONSUMED by the search, OVERWHELMED, FRANTIC. You can't REST until you find them. You feel INCOMPLETE, like a PART of you is missing. And those are just THINGS. What if you lose a PERSON, a CHILD? YOUR child?

WE are that lost child, that lost sheep, that lost coin. We GET lost, mixed up, turned around. We lose our way. We despair, we make mistakes. We get separated from the ones we love, unable to find the way BACK home to where we BELONG. We get LOST.

And Jesus tells us that God would do ANYTHING to FIND us, just ONE of us. ONE life is that important. If you ask rescue workers, it's even worth risking your LIFE for. And if you ask JESUS, it's even worth DYING for.

The NUMBERS in these stories are significant. In the Bible, the numbers 100 and 10 are numbers of fullness or completeness; the numbers 99 and 9 are INCOMPLETE. These parables go with the story right after them in Luke, the parable of the LOST SON. THREE (as in a father and two sons) is ALSO a complete number, but any family with a CHILD MISSING is INCOMPLETE. I've visited with ELDERLY parents who STILL have an empty hole in their heart over the death of a child. Even a mother who carried her baby only a few months – she will never be the same. As I've said many times, it's unnatural for a parent to bury their CHILD.

That's how GOD feels about each and every one of you, EVERY ONE of you. God is a Shepherd in search of the ONE lost sheep. God is a woman searching in the dark, in the crevasses, for ONE coin. God will LITERALLY TURN this world upside down in his search for ONE LOST SOUL. We have a RESTLESS God, a RELENTLESS God, who won't abide the loss of ANYONE, NOT EVEN ONE.

Jesus is concerned about YOU. We have a God who is so personal, that there's an ACHE in God's heart for even ONE person.

We sing Amazing Grace, but have you ever considered just HOW AMAZING it IS? I mean, surrounded by billions of light years of space, among millions upon millions of people, God is ready to lay aside everything else, and devote every ounce of God's power, every DROP of God's love to seeking and finding and saving ONE who is lost. THAT ONE is so ENORMOUSLY PRECIOUS to God that, so long as they are UNACCOUNTED for, there's an incompleteness, an unrest, an ACHE in God's heart that never ends, until that ONE is back where they belong. This is an AMAZING truth – GOD, the creator and master of the universe, is INCOMPLETE, without YOU.

Kathleen Chesto wrote to Catholic Digest to tell them about an incident that occurred in her family. Her five-year-old child approached her one day in the kitchen and asked, "Mom, is God a grown-up or a parent?"

Mom was a little puzzled by the question. "I'm not sure what you mean," she said. "Is there a difference between a grown-up and a parent?"

"Oh yes," her five-year-old answered quickly. "Grown-ups love you when you are good and parents love you anyway."

I know this sounds trite to some of you, but have you ever really appreciated the WONDER of God's UNCONDITIONAL love? I dare say that there are some people in this room who don't really BELIEVE in UNCONDITIONAL love. Some of us are still trying to earn our way to heaven. And they are expecting OTHERS TO EARN their way as well.

Relax, my friends, and let God love you. Jesus is trying to tell us in this parable that God's love doesn't depend on OUR GOODNESS; it depends ONLY on GOD'S CHARACTER. Here is the truth – it's expressed in I John 4(:10): "This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."

You see, ALONE, we are LOST, but GOD FINDS us. In this place, and at this font, and at this table, our GOD FINDS us. In the MIDST of our FEAR and DESPAIR, GOD FINDS us. On the cliff and in the crevices, GOD FINDS us. And he comforts us, and puts us on his shoulders, and carries our burdens, and brings us back home. We once were lost, but now we are found.

And I'm thankful. I'm thankful that our God will NOT give up on us, not on me, and not on you. God will NEVER give up. EVER.

Hear our Lord's words. With all the angels in heaven, he says "COME, REJOICE with me, for I have FOUND the one that was lost!" Amen.