
God of the Lost and Found

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa
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These parables from Luke draw on a very common experience: being lost and found; or losing and finding. Granted, those experiences may be more common for some of us than for others. I, for one, have more than my fair share of stories about losing things, and being lost myself.

Like when I went on a run in the north Georgia mountains, on my first Cathedral Chapter retreat. With the afternoon free, I glanced at a cartoonish trail map and took off, ran out about twenty minutes, and turned around to come back. Twenty minutes. Twenty-five. Thirty. Something was wrong! I doubled back, looking for a turn-off that I must have missed. I found one, but it just looped me back to where I was. I ran back and forth, this way and that; but no matter what I did, I ended up back at the same place. Lost! I was getting tired and dehydrated, but I was scared to stop moving, to stop my frantic searching.

Finally, at my wits' end, I looked up and saw an unnaturally straight line—maybe a roof—in the distance. It was my only hope. So I left the trail and started to climb through the brush, straight up the mountain. And—sure enough!—a shed came into view.

But when I poked my head over the ridge, I was startled by a man sitting in a chair, peering over the edge, with a rifle in his lap. “*I’m sorry! I’m lost!*” I cried out, trying to sound as innocent and harmless as possible, before he could shoot me. “*I thought you were a coyote!*” he called back. After scolding me for walking out of a remote forest into a stranger’s backyard, he explained that they’d had trouble with coyotes, so when he had heard rustling in the woods, he’d fetched his gun and perched himself here. Then, he invited me to sit and rest, got me some water, and he and his wife drove me back to the lodge in their minivan—a good 15 minutes down winding mountain roads.

There are much more serious ways of being lost, of course. There’s the lostness of depression, grief, addiction, betrayal, bitterness—of losing your health, or faith, or a job or relationship or anything that has been a source of identity or purpose. But they have in common those feelings of being alone, scared, vulnerable, and helpless.

In his book *Let Your Life Speak*, educator Parker Palmer writes openly of his experiences of being lost in life—of following his ego down the wrong path, failing, burning out, and falling into depression. Reflecting back, he recognizes all of his stops and starts and detours as belonging to his life—to his journey toward vocation, and his true self, and a deeper faith.

What I really appreciate about his telling is, first, that he’s so honest about how lost and hopeless he felt, especially when he was depressed. And second, that he’s careful not to suggest that inner work is the way out for everyone. Indeed, he needed medication and therapy, in addition to soul work. Nor does he suggest that the insights to be found in darkness justify its pain and suffering.

But he does glean it for fruit. He demands a blessing from it. And looking back, he sees how God sought and found him even there: in the friend who just sat with him. In the “inexplicable grace” of hearing “I love you” in the midst of it. [\[i\]](#) In his soul’s insistence on truth and authenticity. In the courage, finally, to say “yes to life.” [\[ii\]](#)

This isn't to romanticize being lost, in any way, shape, or form. But it happens. To all of us. Sometimes, it's a wake-up call: a call to name what we've lost, and to search high and low until we've found it—like the woman searching for the coin, or the shepherd searching for the sheep, or the tax collectors and sinners seeking Jesus.

But sometimes, we reach the limit of what we can do ourselves. And all we can do now is be still and wait, and pay attention to where we are, and look for the blessings there. And if we can't see them, to trust that we will, to trust that God is at work—that God may in fact do mighty work in us, when we don't know what to do or where to go anymore.

Indeed, what Jesus reveals, in these parables and in his own life, is the God who never gives up on any of us—who never stops seeking and finding, finding and seeking, no matter how many times we get lost. The God who seeks the restoration of all of creation, and who can use anything, *everything*, to that end.

Even these parables! The more time you spend with them, the more lost and confused you get. Trust me; I know! Every time I think I've figured them out, something unsettles my interpretation.

But that's not all: remember that Jesus addresses these parables to the pharisees and scribes, who don't even realize that they're lost. And so Jesus finds them, too, where they are, and calls them back to right relationship with God and others.

And so these parables don't leave anyone out. They manage to find *all* of us—whether we identify with the lost sheep, or the other ninety-nine comfortably in the fold, or with the shepherd or woman who has lost something essential. They find all of us, and call us to be restored and whole—to return to God—, which may mean waking up and seeing that we've lost our way, or turning the house upside down to find what's missing, or being still and trusting that God will find us.

[\[i\]](#) Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), 67.

[\[ii\]](#) Palmer, 72.