



THE GOD WHO COUNTS

September 15, 2019, Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 15:1-10

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Welcome Home.

We have been waiting for you. We counted with gratitude those who were here summer Sundays, but we also counted those who were missing. Summer is blissful, with its different rhythms and scenery, its time for rest and play. But oh, aren't these cool September days in the City as fine a gift? And the church filled again, after the lull of summer's coming and going—this, too, is a great gift.

Welcome Home.

United Methodist Bishop Karen Oliveto tells the story of Todd, a 15-year-old runaway who worshiped at the church she once served as pastor. He was absent from the church for several weeks and people in the congregation were worried. They knew the dangers for a teenager living on the streets. They did everything they could to try to find him.

Then, one Sunday, Oliveto looked up and saw Todd in his wrinkled shirt and tie, crumpled from being at the bottom of his backpack. Overjoyed, she greeted him with a big hug.

“I’ve missed you,” she said.

“You missed me?” Todd replied. “No one ever noticed when I was gone, ever.”ⁱ

Welcome Home.



William Sloane Coffin once greeted his Riverside congregation on a fine September Sunday this way:

“As every citizen needs a homeland, and every family a home, so every Christian needs a particular house of God, an open house, open to members and strangers alike. Every Christian needs a community that works to find love and defeat hate, a place, in short, to make everyone feel ‘at home.’”ⁱⁱ

In acknowledgement of that fact, and in gratitude for having a home church, I invite you to do what the Riverside congregation did long ago—fair warning to those of you who sit in a particular section because you dislike this sort of thing: I invite you, members and visitors alike, to take 20 seconds to turn to your neighbors and say: “Welcome Home.”

The twin parables are perfect for today. A lost sheep is found, a lost coin is regained and great rejoicing ensues. What I find remarkable is that in a field of 100 moseying sheep, the shepherd notices that one is missing. In a house with all of its clutter, in a pile of coins, the woman sees instantly one is gone. Lost-ness is such a profound state that it upsets the landscape all around us. Being lost is so unsettling we do everything we can to regain equilibrium, to regain our bearings. When what is lost cannot ever be found this side of heaven, we have to learn to live with the presence of that absence in our lives forever.

Being “lost” to summer pursuits is delightful, but there are situations in which people become uncomfortably, even desperately, lost. We wake up one day and feel lost inside our own skin...not sure we are doing what we meant to with our life...feeling that things have not turned out the way we had intended and planned and hoped years ago. We can feel we lost in our work or in parenting. When we have lost a loved one to death or to divorce or another estrangement, every day seems strange and unfamiliar. Today, someone has moved to this city, strange and exciting and daunting, and feels lost and alone. Some, like Todd, run away, choosing to be lost. Others are lost in an addiction that has more power over us



than we have over it. Someone here may have lost faith in God and wonders what there is to hold onto anymore. There are so many ways to be “lost.”

The fifteenth chapter of Luke tells three stories of being lost. In the third story, the parable of the prodigal son, there are actually two sons who are “lost,” due to their own choosing and self-will: One left home and lost everything he had, including himself; the other son stayed home, but chose to be left out, lost in his anger and indignation. Our parables are simpler in tone. After all, a sheep does not strike out with deliberate intent—but simply wanders away heedlessly. And a coin becomes lost—not due to some metallurgic guilt, but because of someone else’s carelessness.

George Buttrick was a well-known 20th century pastor and scholar who served the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. In his book on Jesus’ parables, Buttrick says the focus of these two parables is not so much on our “lostness,” a given state of being at some point in every life. Instead, he sees in these parables the answer to the overriding question human beings ask, the question, he says, no life can finally dismiss: “What is God like?” We try, he says, “to slay this question but ever and ever again it revives: “What is God like?”

Buttrick poses some answers from his 1928 context: God is an Abstract Noun; a Presence, though vague; or, perhaps in some dramatic moment, the living Fact of facts...”ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus chooses instead two little stories to give us a simpler, truer picture of “what God is like”: A shepherd who can tell the flock is somehow not complete because one is missing, so God goes in search; a woman who glances at her pile of coins and without having to count them out one by one, sees the collective is less than it should be. She turns her house upside down looking for the missing coin. Who is the God we worship and serve? The God who counts. The God who counts every single one of us and feels that the whole is not whole unless we are all here.

What is God like? Matthew and Luke both tell the story about the lost sheep, but they do not tell it the same way. The differences are several, but one is especially significant: In Matthew 18, the shepherd goes in search of the one who went



astray, the text then says: “And if he finds it...” Did you catch that—“if”? Luke says something else, something more: the shepherd will “go after the one who is lost until he finds it.” Not ‘if,’ but ‘until.’ “What is God like?” God searches for those who are lost and never gives up. God is not an ‘if’ kind of God, but an ‘until’ God.

For years now, churches have been offering ‘seeker’ services and events—for those who are tip-toeing in, tentatively seeking some connection to the divine...or a sense of community...searching for meaning and purpose deeper than a paycheck or a casual group of friends. George Buttrick says turns that around, noting that it is God who is on a quest for us. We seek, as he puts it, because we have first heard “the echoing footfall of the seeking Shepherd...the call of his voice.”^{iv}

Some of the people who gathered around Jesus the day he told these two stories were ‘grumbling.’ But these parables are meant to be unabashedly good news. Both stories end with rejoicing—rejoicing so profound and glorious it cannot be contained. Both the Shepherd and the Woman call their friends and neighbors and throw a party to celebrate that what was lost is found.

So, why grumble? Parables often have twist to them...something to give us pause. In the lost coin parable, the scandal may have been simply picturing God as a woman, sweeping her house, turning over the furniture, then throwing a lavish party for all of her female friends. But what could be scandalous about God as a shepherd, a familiar image for God? Church windows that depict this parable show the loving shepherd in the foreground, carrying the sheep home on his shoulders. The other ninety-nine sheep seldom appear. If they do, they are only background; part of the landscape, cast in the lush greens and soft blues of Psalm 23. But look again: in this parable, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine alone in the wilderness, the desert—subject to danger. One commentator wondered how we church people would feel if our church windows showed that instead: Ninety-nine sheep abandoned in the desert; aghast at the shepherd walking away from them, in search of one at their expense!



So, we might grumble if we are not the one the lost one, but the ninety-nine that stayed put. If we are the ninety-nine obedient, pious and well-behaved sheep, we don't like where this story—and Shepherd—are going. A story in which we are left, under threat and unprotected, for one wandering, foolish sheep that is apparently worth more than all of us faithful sheep put together!

Or perhaps we are not as sheep at all, but shepherds, too, called to follow in the footsteps and ways of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. We might grumble at being asked to risk everything for the sake of someone who is careless or unworthy of our sympathy or resources...all because they wandered across a border and are now alone, lost, in need. Today we ordain and install new classes of elders, deacons, and trustees. They are called to special forms of service in the church and in the world. With them, all of us are sent out to seek, find, care for, welcome those who are lost, least, discounted as unimportant even expendable. To risk everything for their sake. So, what would it mean for our programs and budgets and committee agendas, which are often directed to us ninety-nine, to instead consciously address the ones who are lost? Feel like grumbling? Well, God is all about rejoicing.

Back in April I wrote a column about a pastor I know who went hiking on Saturday and did not return home by day's end. Sid is retired after serving a church in Birmingham for 23 years. He set out to hike a wilderness area north of the city. Sid's car was found late Saturday evening still parked at the trailhead. Search teams went out Sunday morning early, searching until darkness set in. They were back out again on Monday, searching until late afternoon when huge storms rolled through, suspending the search.

By Tuesday, drones and search dogs were brought in. Sid's family, and the pastor now serving the church, waited every day at the trail site. Finally, late Tuesday afternoon, a search team spotted Sid across a creek; he was weak but alive. The rescuers called out to him. Sid asked, "Who sent you?" One of the men shouted back across the water, "Jesus!" Sid was carried out not on their shoulders but by helicopter.



When news spread that Sid had been found, there was great rejoicing. The congregation threw a huge celebration in the fellowship hall. This last week, I asked Joe, the pastor there, to tell me about it. He described it this way: “When we got the ecstatic news, all the food that was on its way to the trailhead for searchers was re-directed to the church. People came to the church bringing even more food to share.” Joe was still at the trailhead, but sent a blast email inviting the whole congregation to the party. “Sid was on his way to the hospital and when I finally got to the church, the celebration had been going on for a bit. Champagne had been popped—then hilariously hidden when the Alabama press showed up. There was applause and cheers and we prayed the best prayer ever and another bottle of champagne was popped open and there was a lot of laughter. It was glorious.”^v

Who is God? The God who counts...every single one of us as beloved and precious and worth risking everything for. What is God like? God seeks until, not if. How does the story end? On God’s side of heaven, with rejoicing so glorious it calls a crowd. What a great story to be part of—what a great story to share.

Welcome home.

Amen.

ⁱ This story is recounted by Melissa Early, the pastor of First United Methodist Church of Arlington Heights, Illinois in her article for “Reflections on the Lectionary,” in *The Christian Century*, August 28, 2019, 19.

ⁱⁱ William Sloane Coffin’s sermon “Home-Coming, Home-Leaving,” preached on September 25, 1983 at The Riverside Church in New York City, published in **The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, The Riverside Years, Volume 2** (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 59.

ⁱⁱⁱ George A. Buttrick, **The Parables of Jesus** (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker House Books, 1928), 178.

^{iv} Buttrick, 180.



^v My thanks to The Reverend Joe Geneau, Pastor of the Edgewood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, AL, for telling me this story.