

Now, I hear these familiar 'lost and found' stories, and it's like having a conversation over a cup of tea with an old friend.

They are familiar and comfortable, they make me feel nostalgic.

But you might not feel the same way.

If you know the stories too well and they seem boring and tired, perhaps it's like having a perfunctory conversation with someone whom you don't find particularly interesting.

So we're going to try to think about these stories from a new perspective, bring some shine and luster to where they may have become tarnished or dusty.

Now, the most common interpretation of these texts is that God is the old woman or God is the shepherd and we are the coins, we are the lost sheep.

We are the ones who wander off, go where we shouldn't go, and the unconditionally patient God that we worship is always waiting, no matter how far we've wandered, to bring us back into the fold.

This interpretation of these stories is certainly valid, but it only goes so far.

For one thing, this isn't many peoples experience of God.

I have counseled people who have such little faith or who have acquired such unhealthy habits that they're pretty sure there is no God anymore.

But for others, when their back is up against the wall, this is when they dig their heels in, draw on their faith and feel more loved than ever.

They do experience the shepherding God who welcomes them back, but not everyone does.

Plenty of people are out there in the wilderness, they're the coin that fell between the floorboards and stayed there for 50 years, or they're the sheep that wandered so far, even beyond God's gaze.

The second potential problem with this interpretation is that it gives us no agency.

The message it says is that we can do whatever we want, whenever we want, God is always there, waiting.

In fact, that one sheep that wandered off got special attention, maybe we should go and do corrupt or unfaithful things only to be celebrated and brought back into the fold.

It's like the story of the prodigal son, which occurs in the Book of Luke right after this text that we heard this morning.

It's easy for us to have that distorted perspective of a child or the prodigal son, 'I will show mom and dad how great I am now by going off and doing something *really* awful, then coming back to repent.'

They'll have a renewed appreciation for me!

When I was in high school and my grades were less than stellar, I remember telling my parents something to the effect of, 'well at least I don't do drugs.'

It's all about perspective, and for the lost sheep, lack of accountability.

Go ahead and wander off, do as you please, God is the safety net that will catch you no matter how far you fall.

So, maybe instead of being offered that cheap grace that some of us won't find relatable, we can think of ourselves as the shepherd or the elderly woman who found her lost coin.

Maybe the reason we are put on this earth isn't to be found, but to find others.

To seek the lost.

*"In her sermon, [pastor and author, Barbara Brown] Taylor observes that 'the invitation is not about being rescued by Jesus over and over again, but about joining him in rounding up God's herd and recovering God's treasure..."*

*It is about trading in our high standards on a strong flashlight and swapping our 'good examples' for a good broom.*

*It is about discovering the joy of finding.'*

*These parables, then, are about the shepherds and sweepers--and we're challenged to see ourselves in them (The Preaching Life)." (UCC Sermon Seeds, 9/11/2016.)*

And another thing I love about this story and imagining ourselves as the shepherds and the sweepers, as she says, is how beautifully intimate it is.

I think that sometimes as the church, and I am guilty of doing this in my sermons too, perhaps we get so expansive to the point that our goals become not only unattainable but also unrelatable.

Maybe we say the word 'everyone' too much.

You know, everyone is welcome, everyone matters, we are called to love everyone.

Who is everyone?

Who can personally, individually relate to being part of everyone?

Say everyone long enough it slowly becomes no one.

But these stories aren't about everyone.

They're about one thing- one sheep, one gold coin.

That one thing matters, the individual object or being that is found.

And you know what?

It's not even found by everyone.

The whole world doesn't instantly find the gold coin at the same time.

The 99 sheep don't go rushing out and find the 1 lost sheep.

It's one thing that is sought after, and one person who does the finding.

And if I am being honest with myself, the most powerful experiences I have had have not been amongst the crowds or in front of the congregation.

The most powerful experiences, the ones in which I am found over and over again, are the ones I have in one-on-one conversations.

I know it might drive you all crazy that it takes me so long to greet people on Sunday mornings after church, but those encounters, with each of you individually, mean as much to me as our communal worship together.

Hearing about your lives and getting updates, that's when the seeking and finding happens.

Or just last week, I was getting ready for worship, running late as usual, I had 20 things to do in 5 minutes before Joe started the prelude and someone came into my office to talk to me.

I paused, trying to be courteous, but also feeling impatient, because this person wanted to talk right before worship, that's not usually when I am at my most present, patient self.

And yet, as distracted and rushed as I felt, this person pulled me aside because they wanted me to know that they've been sober for 25 years and just got their sobriety chip from AA.

After they told me about this incredible milestone in their lives, a wave of calm came over me and I realized that that is what matters, that is what church is about and why I am here.

As someone who probably has an unhealthy obsession with timing and schedules, suddenly it didn't matter if the service started a few minutes late,

because in that moment, I was where I needed to be.

I was being found by this person who told me their story.

Now, you might wonder why I said that I was found in that moment, I mean, they're the ones that got the sobriety coin, not me.

Well it's because when we do the seeking of the lost, the depressed, the lonely, the (fill in the blank), and when they are found and brought into community, or when they experience a sense of joy that's been missing from their lives for so long,

when we, their supporters and people who love them, get the privilege of being witnesses to their transformation,

who is found in that moment?

It changes us.

Seeking others, offering love to them, through that process, we are found.

When a parent loses sight of their child because they turned their head for a second and their heartbeat quickens and they immediately panic,

searching frantically for the child who aimlessly wandered out of sight,

and when the parent finds the lost child, when the sense of relief and calm overcomes that parent, who is really found in that moment?

It's mom or dad.

I think that in the seeking of others, we ourselves are found.

When I'm feeling despondent or when I am throwing myself a pity party, what helps me is to get outside of myself, to leave my house or my office, to find a way to help another, even if it's just listening to what they have to say.

When I serve at Rosie's Place, or listen to someone's sobriety story, or when I overhear you all talking and caring for each other, or even when I pray for someone,

when I get to witness to other people being found or when I get the rare opportunity to help find others who are lost, I am found, I am changed.

So here's the deal, it's the start of a new program year.

It's an exciting time, not only is our calendar filling up with all kinds of wonderful events, but there's a sense of reunification in the air.

That being said, we have a tall order.

Amidst the amazing year that lies ahead of us, we can't forget our call to be seekers of the lost.

And not just specific lost people, not just our friends, but everyone.

There's that tricky word again, everyone, but I don't want it to lose its meaning in the context of our church.

I don't want one single person to fall through the cracks of our community.

This is tough because we have to see everyone and each one, the forest and the trees, the 99 sheep and the 1 sheep.

And when you go seeking the lost, pay attention to what happens on the journey, you might be found in the process.

Amen.