

1

Lost. A sheep. A coin. A youngest son. Parables so familiar that Jesus' message might seem obvious, but as I read again this week the three parables about lost people and objects, I began to recall the times I have experienced loss, whether a misplaced object or a person no longer in my life.

When a person moves out of our lives, we feel pain. Sometimes losses occur in our families, as when a member moves across the country for a job promotion. Sometimes a loss of communication occurs due to mistakes that lead to family arguments and a verbal standoff. And of course, loss occurs when death transports a family member to another mysterious realm.

Loss even occurs in small ways, such as those object around the house that mysteriously disappear. Have you lost something recently? One researcher several years ago decided to find out what were the most commonly lost items, and so he checked the lost and found bins in businesses around town. He counted the items in the bins, and he created a list of the top five items that people most often lose. What do you imagine he found? ...

1. Keys;
2. USB Flash Drives;
3. Mobile Phones;
4. Sunglasses;
5. Gloves<sup>1</sup>

Although people in Jesus' day didn't worry about lost phones or flash drives, they did know what it felt like to have lost something, and in Luke's Gospel we hear how Jesus used that common imagery of being lost in several parables. The first two stories we heard read: the shepherd who searched for one lost sheep, and a woman who swept the house searching for one lost coin. The third parable follows quickly: the familiar story of the lost son who returned home after squandering his inheritance, surprisingly to be welcomed by his father.

Jesus told these stories in response to grumbling by a few religious leaders that were not pleased that Jesus hung out with people who had doubtful reputations. "Look, this Jesus hangs out and eats with sinners, treating them like they're old friends." Jesus had just finished telling a story about those who try to get the best seat at a dinner party and are asked to move to another seat. Jesus then told another story about a dinner host who invited

2

friends to a party but who never showed up so the host invited those in the streets to the party instead. Jesus seemed to be on a roll, making the point that God invites surprising guests into God's place. I imagine some in the crowd were feeling a bit uncomfortable, wondering if Jesus was referring to them as the guests who selected the wrong seat or never made the party.

And then he tells the story about the lost sheep. Maybe Jesus had recently spoken with some shepherds who may have felt a bit isolated out in the fields, hot and smelly from standing in the sun, who were probably avoided by others in social settings. While thinking of those shepherds, Jesus asked the crowd, "If you lost a sheep, wouldn't you go and look for it?"

I imagine a few smiles as people quietly agreed with him, to which he suggested, "The shepherd carried that lost sheep home and had a party to celebrate." And then Jesus throws the punch line: "There's more joy in heaven over one sinner's rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue."

I suppose some in the crowd got the point and began to nod their heads excitedly, while the leaders who raised the issue in the first place began to nervously shuffle their feet, trying to discern how to respond. I'm sure they got the subtle point that those they criticized, Jesus considered the lost ones worth celebrating with a party.

Oftentimes we find it easy to cast judgment on others, or even on ourselves, feeling as those we're not worthy enough of God's love, as was the case with Alice in the novel *Still Alice*. Although just 50, she found herself forgetting and losing track of things more and more, feeling as though she was lost, and then she discovered she had early onset of Alzheimer's. Alice had grown up in the church, but at an early age she began questioning her beliefs and stopped attending.

Now upon hearing her diagnosis, she wandered into a church one evening where she gazed at the light streaming through the stained-glassed windows.

In each of the windows, Jesus...was pictured as a shepherd or a healer performing a miracle. A

3

banner to the right of the altar read GOD IS OUR REFUGE AND STRENGTH, A VERY PRESENT HELP IN TROUBLE.

She couldn't be in more trouble and wanted so much to ask for help. But she felt like a trespasser, undeserving, unfaithful. Who was she to ask for help from a God she wasn't sure she believed in, in a church she knew nothing about?<sup>2</sup>

Like the woman searching the house for the lost coin in Jesus' parable, Alice sought for meaning in her deteriorating memory. She had to stop teaching at Harvard, could no longer help doctoral students with their dissertations, stopped traveling to make presentations, and ended her exercise routine of running since she often couldn't find her way home.

As she struggled to cope with her loss, Alice made a presentation at an Alzheimer's conference where she explained:

I'm losing my yesterdays. If you ask me what I did yesterday, what happened, what I saw and felt and heard, I'd be hard-pressed to give you details. I might guess a few things

correctly...But I don't really know. I don't remember yesterday or the yesterday before that.<sup>3</sup>

As she told her listeners about the changes she had been experiencing, she concluded:

My yesterdays are disappearing, and my tomorrows are uncertain, so what do I live for? I live for each day. I live in the moment...Just because I'll forget it some tomorrow doesn't mean that I didn't live every second of it today. I will forget today, but that doesn't mean that today didn't matter.<sup>4</sup>

We each experience loss, as did those who gathered to hear Jesus. What if Jesus' parable about someone who lost something could come to life? What might she tell us today?

*I'm grateful that you have brought to life Jesus' parable about me, for I'm the one who's often overlooked. I'm the parable lost in the middle of two other more popular parables: the lost sheep and the prodigal son. You probably don't even know what I lost! Everyone loves the story before me about the lost sheep and how the shepherd left the other sheep to find the lost one, then carried it home and had a party.*

*The story after me gets a lot of attention too, about the lost son who wandered away from home, squandered his wealth, and returned home only to be warmly welcomed by his father who threw a party.*

*Jesus did a radical thing by including me in his parables, for I'm a woman, and we had very little status in Jesus' day. We were confined to our homes and were considered inferior to men. I wonder if that's why my parable gets lost between the shepherd and the lost son, for I was a parable about a woman in the middle of two stories about men!*

*Or maybe my story gets ignored since I lost only one coin out of ten. If you think in terms of your coins, you might not think it would be worth searching for a penny or even a quarter, but that lost drachma represented one day's worth of income. How much do you make in one day? If I told you I had dropped a coin worth 100 to 200 dollars here in this building, would you search for it?*

*Having coins was rare among my people, for we often traded services, such as cloth or food. I had saved for many months to have ten coins. Losing one of them was a great loss for me, so of course I moved my furniture and swept my house until I found it.*

*Have you ever lost something? How did you feel as you searched for it? I was desperate as I tore apart my house, and after several hours I finally found it. I went and told my friends about my lost coin and how I found it. I was so excited!*

*Jesus used my story to suggest that God rejoices when one person's life is changed, when one's heart moves from evil to good. I know what that's like, for at time I have forgotten to follow God's ways. Things in life have distracted me from doing the right thing, and I felt so lost, so confused. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever felt lost and confused? I'm sure you have—maybe even right now. Just remember—God never gives up searching for you. Even when you don't know where to look for God, God is always looking for you. (Extinguish candle)*

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During this season of Lent, in those times we feel lost, may we trust that God never loses us, for God always knows us and loves us, even when we forget or wander away and get lost.

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<sup>1</sup> "Top 5 Most Commonly Lost items," [www.zomm.com/blog/news/top-5-most-commonly-lost-items-1525/](http://www.zomm.com/blog/news/top-5-most-commonly-lost-items-1525/)

<sup>2</sup> Lisa Genova, *Still Alice*, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Genova, 251.

<sup>4</sup> Genova, 253.