

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
C Proper 19
St Barnabas's Falmouth
The Rev David Rider
September 14, 2025

Luke 15:1-10

Here at StB's, where we experience high traffic volume passing by our campus, we often hang large vinyl signs with messages to our neighbors

Recent signs have celebrated the strawberry festival, Lobster on the Lawn and—currently—our return to autumn hours of worship

I hope you wait with eager anticipation for our next message

If we were to hang a vinyl sign in the spirit of today's gospel passage, here's what I would pitch: **Lost and Found—Inquire Within**

Today, we engage two brief parables that immediately precede the longer and better-known Parable of the Prodigal Son (or I would vote for calling it the Parable of the Gracious Father)

All three parables speak to the common theme of being lost yet finding our way, and all three end on an upbeat note—if you are an optimist, today's your big day

Yet none of the three parables gloss over human suffering that may come before emerging joy

And all three parables provide a fugal theme regarding the dance between divine grace and human effort—more on that in a minute

Before diving into their details, let's remind ourselves of why Jesus employs parables in the first place, since we get a double-dose today

Why not just send us a memo and get it over with?

By design, parables are head-scratchers that force the listener to hear on a deeper level

Parables use paradox and extended metaphors to reach a different part of our brains than ordinary discourse

Like today, Jesus often uses parables amid socially tense situations, causing his dialogue partners to think twice before verbal arm wrestling

I hope these parables can do the same for us today

So why the emphasis on lost and found, which clearly captures our two parables plus the following prodigal son story?

The shepherd ditches the remaining herd of 99 to search after the one sheep who has lost his way; the woman who loses one of her ten coins searches diligently; and the gracious father rejects all patriarchal protocols with profligate love and embrace of his returning and damaged son

As children of the 19th century's New England Great Awakenings, let's acknowledge our fascination with dark human debauchery and dramatic efforts toward redemption, itself a loaded word in our cultural vocabulary

Our favorite American hymn, Amazing Grace, was written by the legendary slave ship captain John Newman—a deboucherous man if

ever there were one—before a deep life crisis in literally raging seas turned his life around and led him to become a famous hymnist, preacher and abolitionist

Closer to home, many of us have intimate stories of loved ones (perhaps even ourselves) who have struggled—or who continue to struggle—with painful life choices and forces that overwhelm us

Just yesterday morning, a woman living from her car was pulled over by police because of a defective car light, her car registration was expired, the police impounded her car, and the police deposited her at StB's because it was a convenient dropoff—she was lost

Another strand of this struggle—addiction—and its need to surrender to a higher power forms the spiritual DNA for Alcoholics Anonymous, which was founded by Episcopal priest Sam Shoemaker

Behind all of these stories lies a fascinating theological debate regarding God's loving initiative and our human striving

Way back in the day of the New England Puritan divines, there was no question but that God's providence and control calls all the shots, and the extreme version became known as predestination, where we are blessed or cursed from birth by forces beyond our control—not a sparrow falls without God's knowing (MT 10:29)

In such a world, we open ourselves to prevenient grace, where God graciously takes the initiative whether we deserve it or not

As our collective human spirit grew stronger amid the Enlightenment, human effort superceded divine grace, we celebrated robust human agency and accountability to either screw up or get our act together, reducing God to on-call status for tough situations

In this new world, we could lose our way, but then we needed to cry out for help, cry out for divine mercy, tearfully repent, and start over

Think of emotional altar calls and the recent hymn we sang together: I have decided to follow Jesus

For all of this drama—both in our three parables and perhaps in our own family or friendship stories, there is actually a bigger and happier punchline, one of joy and rejoicing

All three parables use the words ‘rejoice’ and ‘joy’ as their climactic exclamations

The stories also use ‘repentance’ and ‘repent’, words with fulsome cultural baggage implying drama and forsakenness

Yet upon reflection, however, the sheep and the coin did nothing that was ‘bad’ or debaucherous before being reclaimed

Whether our personal stories include bad choices or simply being overwhelmed by life forces, we put our trust in a God who wills our wellbeing and the wellbeing of the world in which we live

In fact, a better translation for ‘redemption’ might be ‘transformation’

Its Greek word is wonderful—metanoia

Metanoia means that we have found by unexpected love, whether we deserve it or not

Metanoia leads to transformation and joy, like Newman’s great hymn: “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see”

Metanoia becomes the opposite of paranoia: I want to be on the metanoia team, and I hope you do, too!

The past few days have made many wonder if our nation has lost its way as a beacon of democracy torn apart again by political violence and threatened retribution

As a culture with frayed fabric, we certainly need a healthy dose of metanoia over paranoia

As followers of Jesus and filling a national leadership void, let our cry be one for taking a deep breath, for calling out our nation's higher angels, for finding new ways of using words of reconciliation over threats of violence

As a nation, we cry out for renewed and prophetic meaning, yet we do not indulge in magical thinking

It's hard to imagine any positive outcome for the now-wasted life of a 22-year-old Utah shooter who became lost in the dark hole of internet gaming

Today, closer to home, we host the second of four listening sessions, with the other two coming on Wednesday evening and Thursday afternoon

I hope you will keep metanoia/transformation on your hearts if you attend, for yourselves, for our parish family, and for our nation

Metanoia never glosses over pain and suffering, but it points to God's hope for our flourishing and transformation

As a parish, we can cling to anxiety and scarcity, or we can put our collective oars in the water and paddle toward metanoia and flourishing—the communal choice is ours

Our three parables remain upbeat and hopeful, but they make no suggestion that everyone gets found and transformed

If we are to become a school of love and hospital for sinners, I hope we always pray for metanoia over paranoia, reconciliation over animosity for our own sakes and as faithful beacons to a hurting world

In a trigger-happy culture, Jesus beckons us toward reconciliation and the invocation of our higher angels over our lower demons, and this week has taught us again that we urgently need social conversation about alienated young men in our midst

Like the gracious, tearful father in the prodigal son story, I pray that we run—not walk—with our arms outstretched for any act of reconciliation among our families, our church, and our society

When we do, we will feel the teardrops of joy that rain down as the heavenly chorus high-fives our new life in Christ

Let's hang a new sign at curbside: **Metanoia Beats Paranoia Any Day of the Week**

Amen.