

Sunday Sermon September 14, 2025

Football season has started, and I've had the chance to watch my beloved Green Bay Packers a couple of times already this season.

It had me thinking about a story I once heard about legendary Packers coach Vince Lombardi. Vince coached during the "Glory Years" of the 1960's, and we Packer fans love talking about old Vince.

It seems that in addition to being Packers coach, Vince was a devout Roman Catholic who attended daily Mass at a downtown church. He regularly served on the altar, assisting the priest, lighting candles, distributing communion.

One day some of the daily mass goers came to the pastor to complain. "We've heard that the coach has quite a mouth. The way he talks to his players, he swears like a sailor. Do you really think somebody like that should be up on the altar?"

The pastor paused a moment and then replied: "imagine what he'd be liked if he wasn't up there every day."

"This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." That was the religious folks complaint about Jesus in today's Gospel, when Jesus welcomed sinners to His table. The "respectable people" were uncomfortable with that. They had constructed neat divisions between who was worthy, who was accepted and loved, and who was not. And Jesus, in classic Jesus fashion, turned their world upside down through two simple parables.

"Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, doesn't leave the 99 and go after the one?"

I imagine many of the shepherds in the crowd thinking "me." Risk 99 for one? That's foolish. Risk my life climbing though gullies and up cliffs looking for one lost sheep? Bad business. Just write it off. Sheep wander. Losses are inevitable. Move on.

Not so with God. Not so. In seeking to show his hearers what God is like, Jesus tells this story about God seeking out even one lost soul, making it clear that each and every person is precious and beloved in God's sight, in God's kingdom. That Kingdom is incomplete until all the lost are found.

"What woman" Jesus says "having ten silver coins, if she loses one, does not light a lamp – expending costly and precious fuel – to sweep the house and search until she finds it?" Time, energy, expense for one coin? Doesn't make sense. Let it go. Things get lost.

Not with God. In telling, and ultimately showing, what God is like, Jesus uses these two simple parables, relatable, understandable, to make it clear that God's ways are not human ways. God's economy is not the economy of man. God does not write anyone off.

Where we create hierarchies of holiness and set up distinctions between who is worthy and not, who is accepted and not, who is beloved and not based on our understanding of God and our world, God smashes them all and proclaims God's unconditional love for saint and sinner alike, each and every one.

There's a church in Denver that's called "The House of All Sinners and Saints." Big sign over the door. That sign lists the sinners first.

That's our hope in the church, that all will know they are beloved children of God. Imitating Jesus' open table, we proclaim that all are welcome to this table, the communion table. The only requirement is being hungry. Hungry for deeper connection with God and one another. Hungry for conversion when that is where God is calling us. Hungry to see with new eyes, to see ourselves and others with God's eyes, to know that all are precious and beloved in God's sight. Where else do people hear that message, that truth, in our world today?

Simple and familiar as today's parables are, they are profound teachings on the nature of God. They remind us that God is relentlessly pursuing us, like

the hound of heaven, until we are found and then scooped up, placed on God's shoulders and celebrated. God rejoices. What a marvelous thing.

Author Debbie Thomas, in reflecting on these "lost and found" parables, writes:

"Can we pause for a moment and take in how astonishing this is? God faces genuine stakes when it comes to our lostness. God experiences authentic, real-time loss. God searches, persists, lingers, and plods. God wanders over hills and valleys looking for lost lambs. God turns her house upside down looking for her lost coin....

Maybe the most scandalous aspect of these lost-and-found parables is not that I still get lost. Maybe what's most scandalous is what they reveal about the nature of God...

If Jesus's parables are true, then God isn't just in the fold with the ninety-nine insiders. God isn't curled up on her couch polishing the nine coins she's already sure of. God is where the lost things are. God is in the wilderness, God is in the remotest corners of the house, God is where the search is at its fiercest.

If I want to find God, I have to seek the lost. I have to *get* lost. I have to leave the safety of the inside and venture out. I have to recognize my own lostness and consent to be found....

God looks for us when our lostness is so convoluted and so profound, we can't even pretend to look for God. But even in such bleak and hopeless places, God finds us. This is amazing grace. And it is ours."

Praise God.

These parables of the shepherd seeking one lost sheep and the woman searching diligently for a lost coin are a powerful reminder that our God relentlessly pursues us so that we might be found and know the depth of God's life-changing love for us and for each and every lamb.

Alleluia. Amen