

“U-Turns, Wrong Turns, and Missteps”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 15, 2019

First Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 34:11-16

¹¹For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Second Scripture Reading: Luke 15:1-10

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”



Sermon: “U-Turns, Wrong Turns, and Missteps”

Have you ever lost something important? Something that sent you looking all over the house, digging through the trash, interrogating your co-workers and family members whether they may have some clue where you left it? Remember how it felt when you finally found it?

Last fall Will Grey and I went down to see USC play at Kentucky. He had just gotten a new phone and we hadn’t yet put a locator app on it. At some point early in the game, Will Grey reached into his pocket for his phone and it wasn’t there. We searched all around our seats, but there was no sign of it. We both began to panic a little bit. It was a brand-new phone, so I was just ill, and Will Grey felt bad about losing something so valuable, too. So, we retraced our footsteps, searched near the concession stand where we’d bought our snacks, even stopped by the lost and found office but with no luck. At the end of every quarter we went back to lost and found just to see if someone had turned it in. But the later it got, the more we knew we would just have to accept that his phone was gone.

We were both pretty stressed about it. But there was still a glimmer of hope. After the game, we made sure to walk back to our car by the same route we had taken to the stadium, just in case. We walked along slowly, looking carefully on either side of our path. And just as we were getting back to our parking spot, maybe 50 feet from our car, we found it, lying in the grass beside the curb. He had stumbled over that same curb on our way to the game and his phone must have fallen out of his pocket then. We were so incredibly relieved. It seemed a minor miracle that it had lain there for almost 4 hours with no one picking it up. In the grand scheme of things, it may not have been a huge deal, but in that moment of relief there was joy and we celebrated by going to Wendy’s!

It’s this desperate search for something lost and the mixture of joy and relief we feel when we find it that Luke taps into with these parables of the lost. What we feel in finding what we feared was lost, is what Luke says God feels when one sinner repents; when one person who has been lost is found

God has a path for us; a path that leads to our best life and the Kingdom of God. But sometimes we sin and those sins are missteps that take us off the path; wrong turns that lead us away from where God wants us to be. But God loves every one of us, even when we get lost because of our sin. That was something the religious authorities of Jesus’ day simply could not wrap their heads around. Their thought process was this: “We keep the law. Therefore God values us. Those

sinners who reject the law and who live outside of God's will? God *must* reject them." But Jesus brings good news that God loves and values the sinners the Pharisees despised. That God wants them to amend their ways and turn back.

For that reason, most of us remember the third parable in this series: the Parable of the prodigal son. The son who has turned his back on his own family and has gone off to live a life of bad decisions, and degenerate behavior, comes home. He was lost, says his father, and now he is found.

The story of the prodigal resonates with different people in different ways depending on from whose perspective you hear it. The father's perspective may resonate if you have experienced watching your child make tragically bad decisions or if you have suffered the broken heart of one who has become estranged from a child. Maybe you've experienced that reconciliation or maybe you're still praying for it.

The son's perspective resonates with those who feel like they've been where he was. Maybe you were the one that walked away from good relationships. Maybe you were the one that made the bad life decisions. Maybe you were the one who hit rock bottom. Maybe you were able to turn it around. Or maybe you're still there.

We all get lost at some time or another. That's what Paul is talking about when he says that we have all sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. But we also remember that Paul goes on to say that even though we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. We are forgiven people. When we confess our sins before God, we are assured that we are forgiven. And yet we still get lost. Every day we get lost. Sometimes without knowing it. You see, like the prodigal embracing the life of dissolute living, like the sheep that wanders over the hill, or maybe like the coin that rolls into a dusty corner, we all find a way to wander from the path God has set for us.

And so these parables of lost things and people have always resonated with us as sinners, because they remind us that God loves us no matter what and will always search for us and welcome us home. In singing the timeless lyrics of Amazing Grace we invoke the words of the father: "I once was lost but now am found."

The problem I think, is that we hear the term "lost" and think of the prodigal. And frankly, most of us probably don't feel so epically, tragically lost. Yes, God's grace is amazing, and we gladly accept words of forgiveness, but most of us probably don't feel like we've done much if anything to be forgiven for. Certainly not on the scale of the prodigal. I remember one church-member from a congregation I served a long time ago told me once that she didn't say the prayer of confession in Church because she didn't sin.

We may not feel lost, but remember, there is all kinds of "lost." If you ever watched Looney Tunes cartoons growing up, then you probably remember that Bugs Bunny was always getting lost on his way somewhere. A bunch of those cartoons started out with Bugs popping up out of his hole and looking at his map, only to realize that he was in the wrong place. In one episode he wound up in Germany, when he was trying to get to Las Vegas.¹ In another, he popped up somewhere in the Middle East, instead of his actual destination, Pismo Beach.² And when he would check his map, he would he was always come to realize that he had gotten lost because of a left turn he should have taken in Albuquerque. As he tunnels along heading for one place, he invariably winds up in another miles off course, sometimes on the other side of the globe. That's what I call "Bugs Bunny lost."

The prodigal son was "Bugs Bunny Lost."

Sometimes folks take wrong turns, make tragically bad decisions and get themselves lost, epically lost, Bugs Bunny lost. These are the people who make decisions like the prodigal that break relationships, transgress the law, violate trust, embrace immorality, and maybe even deny the image of God that is in each one of us. Some of you might know what it feels like to be that lost.

But what if you don't? What if you've never taken the wrong turn that leaves you on the other side of the globe from where your heart desires to be? What if you or someone you care about has never been lost like that? We remember the prodigal who threw away everything to follow a path of destruction. But we forget the first two parables that we read this morning about smaller things that were less dramatically lost. The sheep that wandered off over the hill; the coin that rolled under a piece of furniture.

I believe we all get lost. We take wrong turns every day. Maybe we don't get ourselves as dramatically lost as the prodigal, but we make wrong turns just the same. Whether we try and fail or fail to try, we still find ourselves in the rough, outside the margins, struggling to find our way back to the trail. Usually when we get lost it's more like the sheep that wandered away from the heard, probably because that patch of clover over there looked really yummy. And then after he eats for a while, looks up and realizes everyone else is gone. And the coin, it doesn't pack a bag and storm out in a hail of profane words and rude gestures to relocate in a piggy bank far away. It falls down and rolls under something heavy. The young woman in the parable would likely never have been more than ten feet away from the coin she was looking for.

That's the kind of lost we get every day. Maybe not Bugs Bunny lost, but more like the way you get lost in the middle of the night when you can't find the light switch and you try to make your way down the hall to the bathroom and wind up in the linen closet. The results could still be disastrous, but you're not that far off track. You can easily stop and find your way back. But first you have to recognize and admit that you're actually not where you're supposed to be. Which is hard to do sometimes. Our pride gets in the way. Our stubborn desire to not change. Our selfish desire to do what we want. Our immature desire to feel powerful. Our petulant refusal to admit when we're wrong.

The wrong turns we take daily involve harsh words and a lack of patience and kindness; they tend to involve embracing anger and indulging our prejudices. Our wrong turns can take the form of hurtful words spoken to a spouse, or a rude gesture in traffic, or even rejoicing in the failure of a rival. We get a little bit lost when we celebrate wrong-doing that benefits us in some small way, or when our actions cause harm to someone else or at least allow that harm to be done.

Sometimes our wrong turns are accidental, but more often than not we make them by choice. Our lives are filled with hundreds of choices. Columbia University researcher Sheena Iyengar has determined that the average person makes 70 conscious decisions every day.³ When you add in the smaller decisions like whether to scratch your nose or uncross your legs, the estimates reach into the thousands of decisions made daily.⁴ With that many decisions to make, they can't all be good ones. And in fact, all it takes is one or two bad ones and we're lost. Maybe not Bugs Bunny Lost; maybe it's more mistaking the linen closet for the bathroom lost, but still lost.

And that's where these parables speak a word of grace to us. Just because we haven't thrown our lives away on depravity too brazen to speak of in church, doesn't mean we don't suffer because of our choices. Whether it's guilt or regret or a sense of failure, sometimes it's those little missteps; those smaller bad choices that can have the most devastating impact. Being lost feels scary. Standing in the linen closet in the dark you can feel just as lost as if you took a wrong turn in Albuquerque and wound up in Timbuktu.

But the good news is twofold: First, God never stops looking for us. There is no sin too great to change God's heart, and there is no misstep so small, no wound so minor that God doesn't care about us and want us to be made whole. And secondly, there is also the truth that God allows U-Turns. The city of Columbus may not, but God certainly does. And when we find ourselves wandering off the path, no matter how small the deviation, we are always encouraged, invited, and welcomed to turn back.

What does turning back look like? It depends on the misstep. It should include confessing your sin to God. But maybe it also means apologizing or admitting your mistake to a person you've hurt. It might mean paying for something broken or working to make amends for what was done wrong. It could mean reconciling with a person with whom you have not gotten along. It will almost certainly mean changing a habit or stopping behavior that is hurtful either to yourself or others.

But the key to turning back is recognizing that you're off course in the first place, then making the conscious decision to correct your course. Remember, Bug's Bunny always checked his map. That's how he knew he was in the wrong place. Our map is the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, it's our Bible; it's our tradition, it's the testimony of the great Cloud of Witnesses that has gone before us; it's the church, the Body of Christ, supporting one another and holding one another accountable.

When we are open to God's leading, when we're checking our maps, the right path is not hard to find. It may be easy to wander from it, but it's not too hard to find our way back.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ Freleng, Friz & Maltese, Michael. *Herr Meets Hare*. Performance by Mel Blanc, Warner Bros. Pictures Inc., 1945.

² Jones, Chuck & Maltese, Michael. *Ali Babba Bunny*. Performance by Mel Blanc, Warner Bros. Pictures Inc., 1957.

³ "What Is Your Momentum Factor?" Psychology Today, 30 Aug. 2012, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/strategic-thinking/201208/what-is-your-momentum-factor.

⁴ "How Many Decisions Do We Make Each Day?" Psychology Today, 27 Sept. 2018, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/stretching-theory/201809/how-many-decisions-do-we-make-each-day.