

“U-Turns, Wrong Turns, & Missteps”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
1st Sunday in Lent
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Scripture Reading: Luke 15:1-10 (NRSV)

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, & 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 as to whether they may have some clue where you left it? Remember how it felt when you finally found it? In our house, it’s phones and remotes. It seems like every other day, someone is looking for their phone or for one of the remotes for the TV. As much as I use Google, I will not be truly satisfied with a search engine until the day I can type into it “Where are my keys?” and Google pops us with their exact location.

If you’ve ever lost something and then found it, then you know that mixture of joy and relief that Jesus taps into with these parables of lost things being found. What we feel in finding what we feared was lost, is what Jesus 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 value the law. Therefore, God values us. Those sinners reject the law. Therefore, God *must* reject them.” But Jesus brings good news that God loves and values the sinners too; that God wants them to change 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, humbled. His father famously welcomes him with joy and relief, saying “He was lost and now he is found.” And while the story of the prodigal resonates with so many people, it may not resonate with you if you don’t feel like you’ve ever been that epically, tragically lost. But as the Apostle Paul writes, we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.¹ Which I think is why Jesus includes these two parables of lost sheep and lost coins. Neither the sheep nor the coin gets themselves lost on purpose. The sheep likely just wandered off while grazing. The coin was just a victim of gravity and inertia.

We may not feel particularly lost, but remember, there are different ways to be “lost.” I remember when I was young, my father and I went on a Scout camping trip. He and I pitched our tent along with all the other sons and dads nearby. At one point during the night, I got up to go to the restroom. The bathhouse was not that far away, but somehow on the way there and back, I got lost. I didn’t realize I was lost though, until I was feeling around in our tent for my sleeping bag when a flashlight suddenly shone brightly in my face and a voice that was definitely not my father’s voice said, “You’ve got the wrong tent, kid.”

I was lost. My bearings were completely backwards. It was “can’t see your hand in front of your own face” dark and I had no idea where I was or how to get back to where I needed to be. Metaphorically speaking, that’s how the prodigal son was lost.

But there are other ways to get lost. If you watch the TV show *The Office*, you may remember the episode where Michael Scott is using a GPS system to help him as he drives. It’s a sunny day. He can see the road before him clearly. But when the device advises him to turn right, he does so, and winds up in a pond.² The pond wasn’t deep, and he walked away from the accident just fine. But driving his car into a pond was definitely not the path he intended to follow.

Some people get prodigal son lost. They 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 the parable of sheep that wandered off over the hill and the coin that rolled under a piece of furniture are parables for those who are Michael Scott lost.

I believe we all get lost, and maybe don't even realize it. Whether we try and fail or fail to try, we still find ourselves in the rough, outside the margins, off the path and in the pond, struggling to find our way back. Think about that sheep. Jesus often uses the image of sheep and shepherd to describe his relationship with us. Why? Because, compared to the shepherd, sheep aren't very bright. And they can get themselves into trouble pretty easily. The sheep in this parable didn't intend to leave the heard, he just kept eating, moving from one patch of yummy clover to the next until he looked up and found that he was all alone.

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 was probably never more than ten feet away from the coin she was looking for.

That's the kind of lost we get every day. Probably not planned. Probably not intentional. More like a sheep munching a meadow too far, a coin taking an unfortunate bounce, or Michael Scott taking a wrong turn into a pond. The results could still be disastrous, but you're not that far off track. You can easily stop and find your way back. But before that can happen, 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.

And that's where Lent comes in. To take a clear-eyed look at ourselves; to confess our sins, and to turn away from them, that is the hard work of repentance; that is the hard work of Lent.

Because we take wrong turns every day and these wrong turns 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 post on social media, or even rejoicing in the failure of a rival. We get a little bit lost when we celebrate wrongdoing 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 prodigal son lost; but certainly sheep lost, or coin lost, or taking a wrong turn into a pond 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. If it's not where you need to be, sitting in a pond just a few feet off your intended path can feel just as scary as being in the wrong tent in the pitch dark in the middle of the woods.

Now I told you that story earlier, but I didn't tell you how it ended. Obviously, I didn't stay lost, but I also didn't find my way back either. It was my dad who saved me. He realized what had happened and came to find me. And I don't know that I have ever felt such joy and relief as when I was lost in the darkness, and my father came to find me. And that brings me to the two-fold good news of these parables: 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 first recognizing that you're off course, and then making the conscious decision to change direction. When Michael Scott turned his car and drove into the pond, he stopped driving and got out to wade back to

shore. That means repentance: admitting where we have fallen short and then committing ourselves to changing our path. It means listening for the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, reading your Bible, and being a part of the Church, the Body of Christ, a community of other sinners who in Christian love and compassion, strive to support one another and hold one another accountable.

When we are open to God's leading, the right path is not hard to find. And while it may be easy to wander away from that path, God always wants us to and helps us 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 Romans 3:23, NRSV

² Schur, Michael. "Dunder Mifflin Infinity." *The Office*, season 4, episode 3, NBC, 4 Oct. 2007.

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.