

"Lost and Found" A sermon based on Luke 15:1-32 by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young on September 14, 2025 at the First Congregational Church of Onekama, MI delivered by Rev. Sami McRae.

There are many "Losts and Finds" in our lives. Each time I would walk the school halls when my children were little, I would pass a big table piled high with the things that the children had left at school, mittens, coats, boots, scarves, books, hats and so on. If you have ever come off of an airplane and waited at the baggage check until the last bag has been claimed and yours is not there, you have had experience with the "Lost and Found" of all "Lost and Finds"---the airline version. They take you into a little room and flash cards with suitcases and bags of all shapes and sizes and ask you question after question about your bag--which THEY lost--and then assure you that they will find it within a week! I have often wondered--since they are the ones who remind us at the checkout to be sure to check your baggage tag claim check number with the one on the bag--why they can't just do the same and save us all a trip to the "Lost and Found!" At a "Lost and Found" counter, it is up to the one who has lost the object to describe the item in a recognizable way, in order that the item might be given to them---some identifiable description must be given, or the person at the "Lost and Found" counter might not give up the object.

The "Lost and Found" is an interesting phrase. It implies that in order for something to be found, it must first become lost--it is a study in contrasts--and, as I have just said, once something is lost--it's being found and retrieved is dependent upon the Losee to be able to describe that which is lost in fine detail. In other words, even at a standard "Lost and Found" department, the lost item must be clearly identifiable--it must have a distinct identity in order to be found.

This brings us directly to our scripture lesson this morning. Luke's gospel has Jesus giving two short stories about significant things that people of those times could lose and would look diligently for: a lamb from a shepherd's herd, and a coin that a poor woman lost in her home. These two stories were a build-up to the real story he wanted to tell: Jesus' parable of the so-called "prodigal son." It has been discussed and told so much over the years that perhaps it seems hard to find any new meaning in it. For example, the standard description of this story concentrates on the "lostness" of the younger son--and the father's forgiveness of him nonetheless. But I feel that this view is one-sided—at best. It is the son's "foundness" that this story is about, I think. It is not a story so much about the fact that the Father recognized his own son--a son he had been waiting for and looking wistfully down the road for months fearing the worst, but it is a story about the fact that the son recognized himself. It is, in short, a story about self-discovery, about finding oneself.

When the son is in the distant country--he does spend recklessly. Why wouldn't he? He had never had to fend for himself before. He knew nothing of earning a living--a country boy in the city is fair game. It is a story older than the Bible. In addition, the scripture reminds us that once the son had spent everything--circumstances conspired to make his lot and everyone else's worse for "a severe famine took place throughout the country, and he began to be in need." All things being equal--even if he had not already spent his portion--with a severe famine in the land, he would not have been able to survive long, anyway. He COULD have gone home right then--he could have thrown up his hands in despair, but he didn't. He actually acted quite responsibly--he got a job. The younger son, in the process of performing this job--finds himself.

The scripture says, quite literally in the New Revised Standard version, "But

when he came to himself," but when he experienced the self-discovery that he could work like a slave and survive, he realized that what he had done before was actually sinful. For how could he know that squandering his money was bad, when he had never had any money to squander, or a place to squander it? How could he know about acting responsibly, when he had never had any responsibility? In short, how could he find himself, until he knew that he had an actual self to lose? Until he knew that he was unworthy. As he says, "I will say, Father I have sinned against heaven and before you and I am no longer worthy to be called your son." How could he even know that he could be worthy. In order to find himself—to “come to himself,” as the scripture so literally says, the younger son must first become lost—he must first “go away from himself .. ”

The father knows this too. The father, as any wise parent would, waited at the end of that road day after day knowing that the son was inexperienced-- knowing that the son needed to learn the responsibility that was naturally expected of the older son, and knowing, too, that the journey to get that experience was a dangerous one. The father knew that his son could have been killed by bandits, or through disease that he contracted in the filth of the city or been beaten-up and robbed there.

The father was practicing what today we would call “tough love.” Waiting at the end of the road, straining his eyes against the glare of the sun, he knew all these things, but he also knew that if the son came home again, he would have had those experiences that would help to clearly define him and give him a sense of responsibility. He knew that if the son came home, he would be a self-actualized individual. He would most literally be “Found.” So, when the son at long last makes his way home and makes his confession, the father has already moved past that confession in his mind and heart. The father knows already that if the son has

made it this far, has pulled himself up by the bootstraps and found his way home. The father knows that the son has literally “found himself” and is indeed contrite and so the grateful Father almost brushes the sons confession aside in his frenzy of excitement and hastily exclaims, “Quickly get out the robe and kill the fatted calf -- let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is now alive again; he was lost and is found.” The throbbing pulse of the Father’s worst fears are carried in this statement. For him the son was dead--it was his worst fear--for him the son was lost--but now that is all changed for the “Lost has been Found!”

One of the reasons that I have been so focused on bringing my storage items here from Ohio and Vermont is that having them “out there” made me feel uncentered and not completely “at home.” Not having that sense of being “all in one place” made me feel lost. This, added to my uncertain marriage situation, was making it hard for me to maintain a sense of wholeness spiritually. Now, everything is in one place. It is not unpacked and put away, mind you, but it is all here—it is all “found!”

We all have had “lost” seasons in our lives. We have all felt out-of-step with a sense of wholeness and spiritual completeness. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul states this feeling this way:

“¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. ¹⁶ But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life.”

No matter what our circumstances, or how we have sinned and fallen short of our potential, no matter how “lost” we feel, like Paul we are “found” in Christ! Paul tells Timothy that “Even though” he “was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy” through Christ’s grace. We too are now “found” through Christ, whose sacrifice has forever redeemed us from the

cosmic “Lost and Found.” Amen.