

Sermon – Luke 15:1-10
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“The Kingdom is for Losers”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. I'm sure my parents didn't really want me to go, but it's hard, I suppose, to say no when your child asks to borrow the car so that they can go visit friends from Bible camp. So a friend and I set off from Appleton and headed to Wausau, a journey of about an hour and a half down Hwy 10 West to 51 heading north. We went, had an enjoyable day, and in the evening set out to head home. We drove down Hwy 51 and, when we got to Hwy 10, proceeded to go west. I suppose subconsciously I was thinking, “Well, 10 West got me here; it should get me home, too.” Instead, it got us halfway to Minnesota before we realized that, had we been going in the right direction, we would have already made it home. Oops. We weren't exactly lost, but we were certainly in the wrong place, and we sure did feel like losers.
2. Jesus tells us familiar parables today, stories of being lost and found. He tells of a shepherd who can only find ninety-nine of his sheep, and of a woman who seems to have misplaced one of her ten coins. These are stories told in response to Jesus' wide welcome of those who were lost – like sinners and tax collectors – over against the winners of the world, in this case the scribes and Pharisees, those who feel they've got it made. We are invited to see the tax collector or the sinner as the lost sheep or coin; we are invited to see *ourselves* as the lost sheep and coins of this world. Lostness and losing are presented by Jesus as the key mechanisms upon which the kingdom of grace is hinged. These are not stories about how ninety-nine good sheep or nine

- found coins are enough. No, in each parable it is the losing that leads to grace. As we'll sing in a few minutes, "I once was lost but now am found," and it always works only in that order. We spend so much time trying to be winners, trying to find our way on our own, but it just doesn't work.
3. Someone asked me recently, why do we confess our sins each week at the beginning of worship? Isn't it a bit depressing? A fair question that led to some great conversation, but the main point is this: We don't confess our sins to wallow in them or because we want everyone to feel miserable about themselves; we confess our sin before God and one another because we're being honest. We've taken wrong turns. We've gotten ourselves lost. This world groans under the collective weight of our sin and brokenness, the things we've done and left undone, and we cannot free ourselves! We are sheep who have strayed, and what do sheep who stray off by themselves do? Well, I'm a city kid; I have no idea. But according to Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, scholars who write about the scriptures from a social-scientific point of view, "Lost sheep, cut off from the flock, frequently sit down, refuse to move, and bleat incessantly." Lost sheep sound eerily similar to two-year-old humans. We get lost, in sin or sickness, sorrow or fear, and we can't do much about it but sit down and bleat. We are lost.
 4. Fifteen years ago today, we awoke in this country feeling fairly found; pretty safe and secure. By the end of the day we would have lost so much as planes crashed into towers and fields, as lives and families were torn apart, as the peace of this world crumbled around us. And the one good thing to come out of the September 11th attacks, the unity of spirit and determination within our nation, seems to have long since fallen away. Where do we go when we're lost? What do we do when we've lost so much? And loss happens in less world-shaking ways, too, of course. In these days, perhaps you are feeling a sense of loss here at Grace. For some of you, Logan Kruck was a primary connecting point to this community of faith; for others, it has been

- Pastor Kersten's wise, compassionate presence that has made all the difference. And now we prepare to enter into ministry without either of these faithful partners on our staff. Where do we go when we're lost, when we lose the presence of people who mean so much to us?
5. Well, we remember that the kingdom is for losers, for those who *are* lost and for those who *have* lost. The parables Jesus tells today, after all, spend fairly little time focusing on the lost sheep or the lost coin. Instead, they are tales of the shepherd and the woman, images of God at work in Jesus Christ. Jesus, you see, is the one for whom nine out of ten or ninety-nine out of one hundred is never going to be enough. Jesus is like a woman who turns her household upside down, shining light into all the dark and dusty corners of the world, until the coin purse is full once more. Jesus is like the shepherd – a figure, by the way, that the scribes and the Pharisees would have grumbled about, dirty, smelly vagabonds that they were – the shepherd who will leave the sheepfold and wander into the danger of the dark night, predators prowling around, to get back that one silly sheep, picking it up in spite of its incessant bleating, slinging it over his shoulders, and bringing it back home. Jesus is the one who will become lost for this world's losers, forsaking the joys of heaven in order to track down and haul back to God all the lost, the least and the lowest, losing his very life so that we would be found. And not just found, but brought home, welcomed, forgiven, celebrated, and loved. Cause for a heavenly party, indeed.
 6. You were lost, and now you're found! You sinned? God in Christ forgives you! Feel like a loser? Great – this celebration is for you! It's time for a party; note the overwhelming themes of joy in our gospel text today, joy rollicking through the very heavens. And you know what a good party needs – more guests! See, even once you're in the sheepfold or the coin purse, that's not the end of the story. Jesus is seeking others, and Jesus is probably going to use you to help him. Keep your eyes open for who might be missing or feeling

lost. And then go to them in Jesus' name. What does this look like? It looks, I think, a bit like Travis Rudolph, a junior wide receiver for the Florida State football team. He's already scored three touchdowns in this young season, but if you've heard of him, it's probably not for that reason. Several weeks ago, Travis and a few teammates were visiting a middle school in Tallahassee. During the lunch hour, Travis noticed a boy sitting by himself at a table in the middle of an otherwise crowded cafeteria. So the football player grabbed his pizza, sat down by the boy, and spent the whole lunch hour with him. The middle schooler is a boy named Bo Paske; he has autism but few friends. His mom noted how he was routinely left out by his peers who didn't know how to interact with him. But Travis Rudolph saw him and sat with him, beginning a new friendship that continues and that has given young Bo a sense of belonging, not to mention sudden status in his school as the kid who hangs out with the Florida State football team.

7. That's what community in Christ looks like, for it is a community that seeks and welcomes and rejoices with all people. Even the lost. Even losers like you and me. For us Jesus lost everything. And in his losing, the kingdom has been won. Jesus has brought you home. May Jesus use you to bring others home, too.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.