

A shepherd loses a sheep. A woman loses a coin. We can also lose our cool, lose our patience, lose ground, lose our head, lose our mind, lose our marbles, lose our shirt, lose our nerve, lose sleep, lose touch, lose face, lose heart, lose faith, or lose track, and sometimes, there's no time to lose!

When we lose something, we want it back. We feel terrible. There can be sadness, regret, anxiety... We go back to all the places we remember it, and it's always in the last place we look—by definition, (!) since once we find it, we don't need to keep looking. But if we don't find it, a certain disappointment can plague us for along time. We get over the intensity of the moment we realize the loss, but we still would love to have it back.

The people of Judah have lost their identity. They have forgotten who they are—that they are God's beloved. Jeremiah laments that they have forgotten how to do good. In his grief over this loss, he can no longer see the point of God's creation. For Jeremiah, all of creation was supposed to glorify God, especially humankind. But, if humankind had turned from God to their own pursuit of selfish gain, Jeremiah doesn't see the point of the creation. He proclaims that a hot wind will come and scorch everything in its path, and that the earth itself will mourn and the heavens grow black. He says he looked, and there was no one—everyone was gone and even the birds of the air had fled.

The image is the exact opposite of the story in Genesis about the creation. In his grief and disappointment for the people, Jeremiah is imagining the undoing of creation by God. The people had become skilled in doing evil. What was the point in life now?

The Babylonians were about to destroy Jerusalem and the people of Judah. The people must have felt real fear in the face of what would be an inconceivable loss of their place of worship. How could they be the people of God without the temple of Jerusalem? Impossible! How could they be the people of God if the Babylonians invaded their land? Everything was going to change, and they were afraid.

Fifteen years ago today we knew fear, too. Almost three thousand people died in the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and in a field in Pennsylvania. On September 11, 2001, 19 militants associated with the

Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda hijacked four airliners and carried out suicide attacks. We are still feeling the effects of this great loss today. Lives have been changed forever. Loved ones still leave a hole. We all know the familiar catch phrase of the “war on terror”. If anything, the world political scene has become more radicalized and unstable than ever. What will North Korea do with its new nuclear arsenal? What unexpected terrorist attack do we have yet to fear?

People who are afraid can forget who they are. They want to find a way out of the fear, and it can sometimes seem that any way out is the best way, even if it keeps God out of the picture and relies solely on human strength. Jesus is pointing to another way. He reminds us over and over not to be afraid, telling us that he is the way, the truth, and the life. He has chosen to be with the lost and forgotten. He has chosen to eat with sinners and outcasts. He has invited the ones everyone else avoids to join him at the table. He has put the undesirables at the heart of his love. He is offering a place at the table to anyone who wants to come closer to God. There is no judgment, only welcome. Even those in Jeremiah who had forgotten how to do good are invited to come. Jesus is calling together a new community.

The Pharisees are shocked by his behavior. They are the religious insiders who know how to do good. They are like us: they want to be held in high esteem as members of God’s special community, and they are appalled. They don’t want to be seen in the company of the people with whom Jesus has chosen to share a meal. Being at the same table with *those* people is going to reflect badly on them. Can’t those people go somewhere else so we can have a community of the good, the pure, the perfect, they seem to be saying?

So Jesus tells them two parables about losing things that are precious. He puts us in the position of imagining what it would be like to be the precious thing that has been lost and for which God is diligently searching. Have we wandered off, like the lost sheep? Have we suddenly realized that we have lost the others, and don’t know how to find them? Have we crawled under a bush in an effort to stay safe? The sheep is completely unable to make it back to the fold. It is paralyzed with fear. It can’t even cry out. The only solution is that the shepherd must search for it with all his might. He has to find that sheep and carry it

home so that it can find the company and warmth of the other sheep and the protection of the shepherd. And when he does, there is much rejoicing! Or are we the lost coin, stuck under the furniture in a crack between the floorboards, out of sight and alone? The only way back is for the woman to leave all her other jobs and to concentrate on one thing and one thing only: finding that precious coin. And when she does, there is much rejoicing!

Neither the sheep nor the coin asked to be found. They didn't even do the seeking. The shepherd searched for the sheep and the woman searched for the coin. It's as if Jesus is saying to us, it's not so much about your ability to find me, or search for me, or understand me. It's about my diligent search for you. When I find you, (if you let me), there will be much rejoicing.

This is the kind of rejoicing we do here every Sunday. By coming here we let ourselves be found by our God who shows up to renew us in his love. He does that by welcoming us into his presence, forgiving our sins, and nourishing us with his Word and his Body and Blood. We are not a community of the perfect—we are a community of the beloved and the forgiven. Even the ones who look like outsiders are included. To whom can we reach out with this word of welcome and inclusion? Who do we need to invite to join us at our table—at home, at church, at work, at play? Who needs a little bit of God's accepting love? Perhaps they are the ones to whom God will send us this week.