

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, September 14, 2025

Proper 19, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Exodus 32:7-14](#)

[Psalms 51:1-11](#)

[1 Timothy 1:12-17](#)

[Luke 15:1-10](#)

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When I was in fourth grade, I lost my cross.

Some of you have seen this before, and may have heard me tell this story before.

It's a little silver Celtic cross I wear on a chain around my neck. My parents gave it to me when I was in the first grade. So the three years I'd been wearing it by then pale in comparison to the thirty-eight years I've been wearing it now. But even then, it had been almost a third of my life.

My friends and I had taken to doing some wrestling at recess, in a wooded area of the schoolyard somewhat screened from the interfering eyes of adults. And mid-wrestle, I heard the jingle of a snapped chain and felt it slip from around my neck. I cried out, and my friends must have sensed how distressed I really was, because the roughhousing stopped and we spent the rest of recess searching the leafy ground. To no avail.

I was back at my classroom explaining what had happened to my teacher and asking for permission to go back and look a little longer when suddenly I heard the tell-tale jingle one more time. And the chain slipped from inside my sweater where it had gotten lodged, and fell all the way this time and bounced on the classroom floor. And my teacher and friends rejoiced with me, because what was lost had been found.

My cross was precious to me far beyond its monetary value. Today Jesus tells us that sinners are like that for God.

We call Jesus the Good Shepherd. But the story of the shepherd he tells today could be called the Parable of the Lousy Shepherd. Imagine the utter lunacy of leaving the ninety-nine alone and unprotected “in the wilderness” to go after one. For Jesus it’s worth it. This shepherd doesn’t stay here inside the flock where things are organized and protected. He goes out to find the lost one, because it’s unimaginable to lose even one, because that one is precious.

Now the stereotype about sheep is that they are dumb. And scientists tell us that’s not exactly true.¹ They have great pattern-recognition and complex social relationships. But they certainly don’t take care of themselves, and they’re prone to getting lost. If you leave them alone, they wander off. They don’t run away because they’re malicious or evil; getting lost is just what sheep do. And as for coins, they’re certainly dumb. They’re inanimate objects. They don’t get lost on purpose.

¹ Harriet Constable, “Sheep are one of the most unfairly stereotyped animals on the planet. Almost everything we believe about them is wrong,” BBC Earth (April 19, 2017), <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20170418-sheep-are-not-stupid-and-they-are-not-helpless-either>.

The shepherd doesn't say to the sheep, "You must have been a lousy sheep or you would never have gotten lost!" The woman doesn't say to the coin, "If you get lost again, I'm throwing you out with the garbage!"

I'm not saying that we have no agency in the choices we make—although we often have much less than we realize. But I am saying that we have no power to choose not to be sinners, not to need finding, not to need God's help. And I am saying that the initiative of salvation doesn't lie with us. Not in the slightest. It's God's all the way, the crazy shepherd who goes out after a single sheep, the obsessive woman who tears apart the whole house looking for the lost coin. Sheep and coins don't find themselves; they don't make resolutions to get lost no more, or turn over a new leaf. They just sit there lost and helpless until the One who loves them brings them back home.

What does that mean for us? God is not scandalized by the things we do wrong. God is not surprised by our bad choices, our mistakes, or our outright destructiveness to self and others. God does not stay far away from sin. Sin is where God comes and finds us, in the darkest places we wander.

There's a paradox about being here at church today. We know, we are assured, that Jesus will reliably show up at church, every time we come together in his name. That's what the sacraments are all about. But the greatest temptation of the church is to become a club of the Ninety-Nine Sheep, those who think they aren't lost. And to identify someone else as the lost sheep. And if we do that, we make two mistakes.

First, we forget that if we're the ninety-nine and the other person is the lost sheep, then guess where Jesus is? Not in here with us. Out there under a doorway or in a prison or hospital or anywhere else one of his sheep might be lost and scared.

Second, we forget that when Jesus talks about "ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance," he's talking about fictional characters. Ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance don't exist. There's nobody here but us lost sheep. And we are set free when we quit trying to convince ourselves and other people that we're not lost. Jesus doesn't spend his time in the neatly dusted and vacuumed rooms of your spirit, the parts of yourself you keep respectable and put-together. He's out in the back alley where you hide your garbage, knocking at the door of the ugliest, most insecure, greedy, lustful, grasping, chambers of your heart—not to condemn, but to redeem and restore.

If you go visit St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, you'll find a Greek phrase engraved on the altar table in beautiful gilded letters: *houtos hamartolous prosdechetai kai sunesthiei autois*. It doesn't mean "Holy, holy, holy" or "Do this in remembrance of me." It's a phrase from today's gospel, meant as an insult to Jesus, that instead is a testament to his love. "This guy welcomes sinners and eats with them!" And those words are invisibly written on this table too. This table is for lost sheep, lost coins, and lost souls. The only one not invited is one who thinks they don't need to be here.

So come, let whoever is hungry take food and whoever is thirsty take drink without price, let the shepherd and the woman call their friends together and throw their parties, let there be rejoicing in heaven, and let the sinners take their places at the heavenly feast.

Discovery Sunday Sermon

[Tell story of my lost cross]

Have you ever lost anything precious to you?

Have you ever *been* lost?

These two stories that Jesus tells aren't really just about sheep or coins, are they?

They're about *people*. Sometimes people get far away from God. They get lost.

What does it mean to be lost from God?

- Hating other people
- Doing things that are bad for us
- As St. Paul used to be before he met Jesus, as we heard from his letter today.

People are so precious to God that God would do anything to get them unlost and safe and sound. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd. He came into this world to find us: to show us the way to live with God.

If people are so precious to God that means that we are—and also other people are, even when they're hard for us to appreciate.

And at the end of both stories there's a feast. That party is the heavenly party. God has a party prepared for us and for everyone and the whole world. And God is so determined to get every single one of us there.

We're going to continue with our prayers and then we're going to have Holy Communion which is a little miniature version of that heavenly feast.