

One of the reasons that Jesus spoke in parables is that they were so easy to relate to. I can certainly relate to the lost-and-found parables in the Gospel of Luke. I seem to spend an inordinate amount of my time losing and finding things. I once lost a set of car keys in my purse. They fell into a hidden crevice, fitting so tightly there that they didn't jingle when I shook the purse repeatedly looking for them. I found them six weeks later. I had them all along.

I must lose my car keys three or four times a week. But that's better than losing your car. Back in May when I was in Nebraska with my parents, my husband drove up to a meeting in Palo Alto and called me late at night all panicky to tell me that he was wandering the streets in the dark unable to locate where he parked his car. My absent-minded professor husband had to Lyft home and go looking for it the next morning.

We all lose things, some of us more than others. So we can all relate to the woman in Jesus' story who was searching for her lost

coin. But Jesus tricks us in this story, because the earnest woman is not us. Jesus wants us to think of the woman as God, and she's not looking for a lost coin. She is looking for lost treasure; the treasure is us.

The reasons we got lost are many, whether it is because of decisions we made or neglected to make or things that happened to us or never happened for us. For some reason, we rolled into some dark corner of her house or under some heavy piece of furniture with the dust bunnies and dog hair or we got stuck high on shelf in a closet for years or decades, living in the dark.

Fortunately for us, the one who is looking for us is God and she has a light. When she turns her lamp on, her light reaches into all of our dark corners and illuminates all of our dark secrets. Like sunlight in the overcast and rainy northwest, her full-spectrum light shines on our sun-deprived spirits and brightens up our gloomiest, wintriest thoughts and feelings. This is the light of Christ, "the true light which enlightens everyone." [John 1:9] And so amazing is his grace

that all we can do is cry out: “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

More lost and found. My grandfather worked for the Burlington Northern railroad and after he retired, he gave my dad his gold watch. My father cherished that watch, but in one of our moves, he lost it. Years later, my parents told us kids that we had to collect our childhood mementos. They weren't going to store them for us forever. So I picked up my stuff. And when I opened the box that had my horse show ribbons in it, there was my grandpa's watch. I have no idea how it got there.

The same happens to us. We get lost in life and have no idea how we got there. We just hope that we don't have to wait too long for someone to shine her light on us or open our box and find us. And though it's possible to get lost even though we've been right here in God's house all along, there are others who get lost because they've wandered off. But Jesus has a story for them, too.

In a flock of a hundred, it's kind of surprising that only one sheep would go astray. Wouldn't that be an acceptable loss? To most anyone but the Good Shepherd. What about leaving the 99 to retrieve the one? Wouldn't that be an unacceptable risk? For most anyone but the Good Shepherd. That's because he loves every last one of his sheep. The only question is why would the lamb leave? I suspect it was seeking greener pasture.

These days, I think not just of lost lambs, but of all the animals and plants that we are losing. As the climate changes, they are literally seeking greener pastures, trying to find a healthier environment so they can survive and the options are limited for many species. Today, my question is about the human species, specifically, the Christian subspecies, which includes a peculiar variant that we call *Methodist*. My question is this: If we are sad about losing animals and plants, if we are concerned about an arctic without polar bears and forests without redwood trees, are we also concerned about churches without young adults?

For years and years, churches have been losing young people. Willow Glen, Almaden Hills and Cambrian Park UMC's tried to reverse that trend 17 years ago when our three churches came together to hire Lisa Jacobs full-time to start the Joint Youth Ministry. You essentially agreed to take resources away from the 99 sheep in the pews, so to speak, so that we could go out looking for lost lambs in middle and high school. At first, Lisa found just two. But over time, the flock grew.

By now, hundreds of kids have graduated from our youth group and many of them have grown up and moved away. But some of them are still wandering in the wilderness of the South Bay. Some are still connected through social media to their friends from the old JYM, but I think it's fair to say that most are not connected to this or any church. And why would they be? Would they find in any of our three churches the green pastures and still waters that would restore a young adult soul? I don't think so.

But I can't see the Good Shepherd giving up on these lost lambs. Can you? Last week after worship, we held a congregational meeting, and I tried to describe the conversations that we have been having with our sister churches and the district superintendent about the possibility of sending to the South Bay a specially-trained pastor to be a shepherd to a new congregation created by and for young adults. Our three churches were chosen to be a part of this conversation because we did such a good job at raising up disciples of Jesus Christ from birth to age 18, and there is the hope that some of our kids who are no longer kids and their friends could form the nucleus of a new congregation.

But last Sunday, when I suggested that our churches may have to change, that some ministries or pastoral appointments might have to rearrange, in order for that to happen, I saw some blank faces. I realized that in my attempt to make a brief report, I had jumped to the "how" without fully explaining the "why."

Pastor Susan came to my rescue, and I think she put it best. Susan reminded us that when we baptized these kids and again when we confirmed them, we made a vow to them. We said that they were our sisters and brothers in Christ, members with us in the household of God. We promised that we would “nurture them in the Christian faith and life,” that we would “surround them with a community of love and forgiveness” so that they might “grow in their trust of God and be found faithful in their service to others.”

We made that promise, and as far as I know, there is no expiration date on it. None of us ever graduate from needing to grow in our trust of God or learning how to be faithful in our service to others. As young people leave school and strike out on their own, making decisions about jobs and relationships that will set the course of the rest of their lives, it is a crucial time for us to be true to the promise that we made to them. Susan reminded us of that promise. Can't you see how keeping that promise could deepen our own faith and sense of purpose?

Making a place for young adults to connect with each other and with God is super exciting, but also more than a little scary. For what guarantee do we have that if we really go after these lost lambs, we won't get lost ourselves? Every time I hear a version of this fear, every time I myself think that we three churches have enough struggles and we don't have the resources to make room for a new church nor do we have the strength numerically or financially or any other way to support a new congregation, I hear the words of Jesus ringing in my ear, loud and clear: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." [Mark 8:35] I am convinced that these are the words that have to guide everything we do at Willow Glen. If we want to be found, we are going to have to be willing to get lost.

But I can sympathize with the 99, too. Have you ever wondered how the 99 sheep felt when the Good Shepherd left them to go looking for the one that was lost? Were they scared? Did they

feel abandoned? Did they think that the Shepherd had left them to fend for themselves against the wolves? I try to imagine what he would have said to them before he left to go look for the lost. Because it would probably be similar to what Jesus is saying to us today:

“My dear little lambs, I’ve been with you all this time. Have I ever failed you? There has been good weather and bad. There have been years when the rain was plentiful and the grass lush and there have been years of drought when the pastures withered. But through it all, I have always provided you with everything you need. So you need not fear. I raised you to be healthy and strong and trained you to stick together.

But you have to know that you are not my only flock. “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also....” [John 10:16] I am their shepherd, too, so I am asking you to share me. These are ways you can help me: You can hold down the fold. You can keep the light on for me. Or you can go and get a

little lost with me and keep my company. I am the Good Shepherd, I must go looking for lost lambs. Somehow, somewhere I will find them, and I hope all of you will rejoice with me when I bring them home.