

Vignette: a noun, meaning a brief evocative description, account, or episode. We've all read vignettes: Readers' Digest is full of them. We've all seen vignettes from Rowan & Martin's Laugh In and Carol Burnette to Blue Bloods and This is Us. Today, we'll hear vignettes, just like the people in Jesus' day.

His parables were short stories meant to illustrate a point. To tell you the truth, there were so many things that jumped out to me in today's scripture, that I wanted to offer you a buffet of 'food for thought'.

If I titled sermons, today's would be called "Lost and Found". From time to time, we all lose things and sometimes we can spend a tremendous amount of effort trying to find them. Kids lose shoes and homework. Adults lose pens, earrings, and glasses. That can be frustrating, right? And where do you find your glasses after looking for 20 minutes? On top of your head?!

The worst is socks. You put pairs into the laundry, but only singles come out. You know, it's said that all of the socks that are lost in the washing machine come back as Tupperware lids that don't fit any of your containers!

Ever lost a puzzle piece? Oh my gosh, you spend hours putting together a puzzle and you realize you're missing a piece. The puzzle isn't complete without that one piece and you've quite literally got a gaping hole and several points without connection. Is that what it's like for God?

Is every single person a part of God's great jigsaw puzzle? And is every piece important to the whole? When one piece is lost, doesn't it affect the function of the entire puzzle? When one piece is lost, doesn't it affect the bigger picture? Are those tax collectors and sinners—the ones on the outskirts of community—the one no one wants to touch with a ten-foot pole--actually like puzzle pieces? Are they supposed to be connected to us? We may see ourselves as disconnected from one another and it's true that the puzzle pieces in the top left corner don't physically touch the pieces in the bottom right, but they are all connected and all necessary in order to complete the picture! And isn't there rejoicing in heaven when the lost has been found and is back as part of a group? (Without that piece, the puzzle is incomplete. And if you don't find that lost piece, doesn't the **entire puzzle now have diminished value?**)

When you lose something, there are a myriad of implications. What do you take every time you leave the house? Money, keys, ID, right? Now imagine that you lost your car key and now you can't get to your appointment. All of a sudden, something with little apparent significance (the key) becomes something you can't move forward without. Your attention is diverted from your prior intention. Where before the loss, the most important thing on your mind was the doctor's appointment, **now** the most important thing is recovering the key that has been lost (so that you can proceed along). You had that key and it may sit in your pocket or at the bottom of your purse, but it wasn't the most important thing there—until it wasn't there.

By virtue of its loss, the perception is that it has increased in importance, but in truth it had great value all along. Jesus has a crowd of tax collectors and sinners who have gathered around him. And he's got Pharisees listening, too. Could he be telling the tax collectors and sinners that they do have inherent worth? And could he be telling the Pharisees that these people, the ones they consider "lost causes" are actually valued by God?

Imagine that you're down at Long Sands on a breezy day. You're getting ready to buy a clam plate at Sun and Surf so you take out some cash. But a gust of wind comes by. Which one of you wouldn't go chase down a \$20 dollar bill that gets picked up by the wind? (Even if you've got another \$80 in your wallet?) Even though you have more money, that \$20 is valuable to you.

You've probably invested time and effort to earn that money and it represents more than a piece of paper. It might be a clam plate or several multipacks of seltzer water or it could even be the gas and tolls to get you to Boston and back. If that \$20 were to get caught in the tide and carried out to sea, it is worthless. It can't be used for its intended purpose which is to be traded for goods or services. Even though it is still a green piece of special paper with twenty printed on it, its inherent value is diminished due to its location. This is true of the sheep who has wandered off. It can't be used for milk, cheese, mutton, or wool. This is true for the coin on the floor because it can't be spent. It could be that

the sheep has a nice long life out in the wilderness, although it was isolated, vulnerable, and lonely. That lone sheep never met another one and never had a family. It could be that the coin stayed on the floor for years. Perhaps it even outlasted the house and now it sits 3 feet below a parking garage. It had great potential value that went unrealized, unutilized, and unspent. Is this what God sees in those sinners and tax collectors? Is this what God sees in the Pharisees?

I want to talk with you about that coin for a second. When we think of coins, we think of something that is shiny and perhaps silver—something that may look like this (quarter). In truth, ancient Roman coins were much smaller and less obvious. The coin in question may even have been bronze. It could have looked like this (showing coin), which is an actual ancient Roman coin. Something this dark and this small could have disappeared right into the floor. They didn't have hardwood floors or wall to wall carpeting, but instead, dirt floors. Imagine dropping this. That's why the woman had to get out the broom and the lamp so she could really look closely and find what she was seeking. She took the lamp to help her. Could it be that that light represented Jesus, the light of the world? He can always help you find what you've lost. And that light can also guide the lost home.

Have you heard about the man who lost his glasses one night and was outside looking for them on the sidewalk under a streetlight? A neighbor came out and asked what he was doing. He said he was looking for his glasses and the neighbor volunteered to help look. After a while, the neighbor asked, "Are you sure you lost them here?" The reply was, "No, I actually lost them in the car, but the light is better here." If we want to find something that is lost, we have to look where the item is. We won't find the glasses we had in the car out on the sidewalk. Jesus went to where the people were. Last week he was talking about the cost of discipleship and now here he is talking to those who have nothing left to lose, but everything to gain (or regain) from an association with Jesus! They were lost and now they're found.

Today, when we lose something, we may fear that there's a price to pay. We may worry about getting into trouble. We may call out the troops to help us recover the thing that's been lost. But that didn't happen in the examples Jesus gave. In fact, the friends weren't called out to help search for the items, but they were called to help celebrate when the sheep and coins were recovered. Thirty years ago, you and I may not have gone down that well to help rescue Baby Jessica, but we breathed a sigh of relief when she was found and brought to safety. And didn't we collectively breathe a sigh of relief when the boys' soccer team in Thailand were rescued from the cave and the Chilean coal miners were rescued after more than 2 months being 2000 feet underground? So, then, if we have cause to celebrate when someone recovers something precious, are we the friends in this story? Is it up to us to notice and rejoice every time someone who was lost is found?

**Or are we ourselves 'the lost'?** In the stories Jesus told, there was no malintent on the part of the sheep or the coin. They just got separated from the flock and the purse. When I was five or six years old, my parents took me and my two siblings to Jordan Marsh in the Maine Mall. I remember some parts of the experience very vividly. We were all in the same area on the first floor—perhaps separated by a few display bins, when my father said he was going to take my sister and brother for an escalator ride. I wasn't sure what that was so I said I didn't want to go. I heard them chatting and laughing as their voices drifted above my head, so I followed the sound. I got on the escalator by myself and got to the second floor. But I didn't see them and could no longer hear them. I wandered around on the second floor looking for my family for some time. I knew that if I ever got lost in a store, I was supposed to find someone at a checkout, but there were several registers with no attendants. The minutes ticked by. I later found out that my family had gotten all the way to the car before they realized that I wasn't with them. Meanwhile, I was lost and afraid and trying hard to be brave. The first tears were spilling out of my eyes when my mother found me. We were both tremendously relieved. So it is that both the sheep and the shepherd rejoice once the reunion takes place!

I was lost, but not intentionally. And there was no judgement and no blame assigned. There was no judgment about why the sheep or coin took off. In fact, the only judgement in the whole passage comes from the Pharisees--and it's directed at Jesus. The entire reason Jesus is telling these stories is in response to the Pharisees' comments! The Pharisees mutter, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Isn't it funny how Jesus always takes that cultural convention and turns it upside down? If you're Jesus or one of his followers, you don't judge the outcasts, you welcome them. Those on the fringes have value, too! We are \*all\* God's children and thus we all have inherent worth as well as instrumental value. If people are living in ways that are "wrong", Jesus engages with them—so that they

can they learn the “right” way. And, by the way, that includes the Pharisees, thought to be the religious elite when Jesus and his disciples were just a bunch of rag-tag itinerant preachers. You can probably see Jesus response as a veiled insult aimed at the Pharisees, but what if he’s **not** slamming them? Could it be that in the spirit of loving kindness, Jesus is challenging them and inviting them to come back into the fold?

Today we heard about sinners, tax collectors and Pharisees. We heard about the lost coin and sheep; the shepherd and woman who found their items and the neighbors who celebrated when their friends recovered things of value. With whom do you identify? In the parables, there was distance between the lost item and the one searching. In both cases, the distance was bridged and they were brought together again...and there was much rejoicing. May it be so for us! Your holy homework this week is to intentionally look for those who are lost and then to shine Christ’s light, without judgment, so that they may find themselves, find their way home, or be found by the one who considers them precious. And then you shall rejoice! Blessed be and amen.