

# God's Boundless Love

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God's beloved people, grace to you in peace from God our Creator and from our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's good to be back with you in worship today. The last time that I was here at Messiah was a couple of years ago, and I was preaching into a camera with two or three people. Maybe four or five people—with tech and cantors—and that was it. We were here by ourselves. And so, I just want to take a moment to pause, and look around, and think about what a simple and marvelous gift it is to be together in this place again.

Today we celebrate a new season in the life of this congregation, as you kick off your fall activities and as we officially install Pastor Bridget Jones. This is the day—most importantly—to remember God's faithfulness to us: season in and season out.

The gospel reading today paints a vivid picture of this faithfulness. In it are two parables about being lost and found. Now, I have a tender place in my heart for these parables because I am a loser. I lose things a lot. My husband will attest to this because he is a finder. Praise God! That makes our marriage work.

When I was young, losing things—this proclivity that I have—would cause me great distress. I remember losing a ring one time. There was nothing treasured about it. I think I probably got it out of a gum machine or something, but I remember losing it and I cried off and on for days.

As an adult, I'm surprised by the casualness with which I lose things. I usually don't sweat it too much. I think this is because I have more stuff than I need, and—with the exception of a few sentimental items—most of my stuff is replaceable.

I was thinking about everybody going back to school this time of year, and I know some of you must work in schools. Think for a minute about the lost and found pile at your average school. I'm sure I don't know how long Auburn has been in school now, but where I live in Gig Harbor, they've been going for a couple of weeks. And I bet you there is already a significant pile of sweatshirts and coats. By winter break it'll be a mound, and much of it goes unclaimed and is donated other places.

There was a time when our possessions were handed down generation to generation, and it would cause deep grief if something was lost. But now we acquire them quickly and replace them quickly. So maybe we've developed a higher tolerance for loss.

But the characters in this story are not like that. They take their losses very seriously. Each of these short parables, you may have noticed, begins with a question. Jesus says, *which of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after that one that's lost until it's found?*

I know I'm in trouble right away with that question because I think, *well, not me. I wouldn't do that. That seems like bad*

*economic judgment. You could come back all happy with your one sheep, and 99 could have walked off a cliff.*

*Jesus says, what woman having ten silver coins if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully?*

I can answer that.

Not this woman. I have more coins than I know what to do with. Right? They're rattling around the washing machine, and they're in my pockets. You know you're old and jaded if you don't stop to pick up anything less than a quarter.

But this isn't the case with the shepherd and the woman in the parables. They are not like me. Perhaps the purpose of these two little stories isn't to show us what we are like, but to show us what God is like. It's just what Pastor Bridgett said in her time with children. The characters in the story reveal the character of God. we worship a God who sweats the small stuff: the one lost sheep, the one lost coin, the lost son—often called the prodigal—which is the third story in this series.

It seems that in the household of God, there are no acceptable losses, no write offs, no replaceable lives. Human beings created in the image of God are made for relationship with God. When something gets in the way of this relationship, and things aren't the way they are meant to be, God is at work to restore the relationship. And when this restoration happens, there is great joy.

Did you notice that refrain throughout these parables? *Rejoice with me, for what was lost is now found. What was separated is now reunited and whole.*

God takes great joy in being connected to us, and being connected to God is how we flourish. These are comforting words, aren't they? Gathered together on this Sunday morning in this sanctuary, they bring me a sense of peace and joy, so I can only imagine how these words sounded to those tax collectors and sinners that were listening to Jesus when he told these parables.

At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus' audience primarily consisted of those who had been exiled from proper society. The crowds were thinning as his radical teachings offended people, and they turned away. It was the identified sinners who stayed close, who hung on his every word as if their life depended on it.

What they heard from Jesus was a profound yet simple truth: there is no such thing as beyond the reach of God's grace. There is no such thing as outside the realm of God's concern. It brings God deep joy to be in relationship.

In fact, you could make a pretty persuasive theological argument that this is why God created: to be in relationship and to open the possibility for us to be in gracious, compassionate relationship with each other. This god is the one who relentlessly pursues that goal.

Friends, we are so blessed to know this about God, to hear these promises week in and week out. This is the good news that orients our lives and that allows us to trust that we are indeed beloved. It's a cause for rejoicing.

At the same time, there are many in our world who have not experienced this God of wide-open arms. In fact, they've experienced quite the opposite.

There are individuals and whole groups of people who have been told that they are somehow outside the circle of God's welcome. Something about their identity, their life circumstance has placed them outside the fold, according to our standards. Not worthy of the same promises that so anchor us in hope.

Tragically, we as a church have sent these messages in our language and in our practices. We have blessed categories of *insider* and *outsider*. *Welcome* and *unwelcome*. *Those who belong* and *those who do not*. We may be too polite to say it directly, but trust me, if you're on the outside, you hear it loud and clear.

The irony is, as followers of Christ, whenever we practice selective grace or selective welcome, it is **we** who are lost. It is **we** who need to hear once again of God's heart for sinners. That is for **all of us**, no matter what size, shape, color, class, political party, gender, sexuality, vocation.

We need to hear again the message of God's great longing for all of us and God's deep desire to bring us all home. Home to ourselves, home to each other, home to God. It is this great good news of God's expansive grace that your pastors are called to proclaim to you season after season.

In just a few minutes, you will hear Pastor Jones promise to proclaim the gospel and to wash you and feed you with God's grace in the sacraments. You have called her to join you in stewarding the faith formation of this community. It will be her duty and delight to marinate you in the grace of God and to accompany you as a fellow pilgrim following in the way of Christ.

She will also be called to challenge you to live out this gospel of mercy and love—not only within these walls, but outside these walls—so that all may come to know this God. As you begin this new season of your life as a congregation, may the relentless grace of God be your sturdy foundation that brings comfort. May it be the holy fire that moves you out from this place, seeking to live in relationship of justice and joy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.