



**From the Pulpit: April 23, 2023**

Third Sunday of Eastertide—Earth Day

**The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg**

Luke 11:1–7

*The Valley of Lost Things, I: The Gospel Within the Gospel*

L. Frank Baum of course created the wonderful land of Oz and then he went on to imagine other fantastical kingdoms adjacent to Oz including Merryland. Merryland consisted of seven valleys, the last and least visited is called The Valley of Lost Things.

The floor of The Valley of Lost Things is covered with coins, and pins, and buttons, and caps, and overcoats. Luke Chapter 15 is the Bible's valley of lost things. Jesus tells three consecutive linked parables about lost things including this first this first one:

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

*So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*

*"Luke Chapter 15 is the terse précis of the entire Bible, the concise abstract to the sprawling dissertation the Bible finally turns out to be. If you are lost, says the entire Bible, God wants to find you."*

**A**t the height of the opioid epidemic in Appalachia 15 years ago, prescription drug overdoses killed more people in the state of Ohio than traffic accidents. In one small Appalachian town in Scioto County, 24 young people died of overdoses in just a

couple of years. OxyContin was the drug of choice.

One evening at dusk, in the flickering light of a silent television, Judy Mannering found her 29-year-old daughter Nina dead in her own home, murdered by an addict looking for pills. Nina's 8-year-old daughter saw it happen. "I miss her so much," said Mrs. Mannering. "If you had 100 kids, you'll never replace the one you've lost."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps Jesus' little parable about the shepherd with 100 sheep was the quiet tape playing subconsciously in that grieving mother's mind.

I don't know much about shepherding, but 99 out of 100 seems to me

like a pretty successful shepherding expedition; he manages to secure all but one. A Loss Manager at a Walmart warehouse, or a Shoplifting Detective on a Costco retail floor would get a huge bonus if his store finished the fiscal year with a mere 1% of merchandise lost to shoplifting or forklift-spearing damages.

<sup>1</sup> Sabrina Tavernise, "Ohio County Losing Its Young to Painkillers' Grip," *The New York Times*, 04-19-11.

According to Jesus, however, God cares as much for the single lost lamb as God does for the ninety and nine brought safely home. According to Jesus, God's motto is just like Judy Mannering's: even if you have 100 kids, you can't replace the one you've lost.

In the fifteenth chapter of the third Gospel, St. Luke gives us three linked parables of Jesus with a single, common theme: all three parables are about four lost things—a lost sheep, a lost coin, and two lost sons. Bible scholars sometimes call Luke Chapter 15 *The Gospel Within the Gospel*. I love that way of thinking about it. *The Gospel Within the Gospel*. Luke Chapter 15 is the terse précis of the entire Bible, the concise abstract to the sprawling dissertation the Bible finally turns out to be. If you are lost, says the entire Bible, God wants to find you.

Why does Jesus tell these three parables about lost things in Luke Chapter 15? I'm glad you asked. It's because the smug Pharisees have been rudely and aggressively complaining about him. Right in front of him. "I'm right here," says Jesus. "You're not exactly whispering. I can hear you."

"This fellow welcomes sinners," they whine; "he eats with tax collectors, the scum of the earth. He has no scruples whatsoever. He can't tell the difference between Pope Francis and Vladimir Putin."

"So Jesus told them this parable," Luke reports. "Which one of you," he asks, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness to go after the lost lamb until he finds it?"

Did you notice the different vocabularies Jesus and the Pharisees utilize to describe the tax collectors, the wayward, the endangered? The Pharisees call them 'sinners,' but Jesus just calls them 'lost.'<sup>2</sup> "They're not *bad*," he says, "they're *lost*." They're just lost. They've just wandered off.

To Jesus, we are not *bad*, we are just *lost*. We may sport Elizabeth Holmes' mendacity or Sam Bankman-Fried's recklessness or Gordon Geckko's greed or Lothario's licentiousness or Narcissus' self-absorption, but we are never so lost that we cannot be found, we are never so damned that we cannot be saved, we are never so sick that we cannot be made well.

Are you lost? Have you lost your way? Midway the journey of life do you find yourself lost in a dark wood alone?<sup>3</sup> The Good Shepherd will find you. God's grace is so vast, so spacious, so relentless, so irrepressible, so infallible, I've no words to tell you about it. Only Jesus' troika of linked parables comes close. God's love is a greedy, grasping, needy, lonely love that helicopters the desert, that sends a kennel of German Shepherds and a battalion of eager volunteers into

the mountains till it finds its precious treasure, a single lost lamb.

When he was fifteen years old, Jeremy Crawford of Oregon discovered that he had Ewing's sarcoma. To cheer him up and take his mind off his treatments, Jeremy's mother Lana bought him a German Shepherd puppy.

"we are never so lost  
that we cannot be  
found, we are never  
so damned that we  
cannot be saved,  
we are never so sick  
that we cannot be  
made well."

<sup>2</sup>George A. Buttrick points out the difference in Jesus' vocabulary in "The God of the Lost," *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990, originally published by Harper Brothers, 1928), 181.

<sup>3</sup>Adapted from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy, Inferno*, Canto 1, ll. 1–3.

They named him Grizzly. Grizzly would whimper constantly. At first, you thought he might be in some discomfort or anxiety, and then you discovered that Grizzly was just chattering away to himself, or to anyone who was listening.

For a while it looked like Jeremy might win his long battle with Ewing's sarcoma, but he died in his mother's arms at the age of seventeen.

Lana was simply undone by Jeremy's death. Jeremy's long and difficult illness had strained her marriage till it broke apart; she was a single mother, now childless; she didn't have a job; she was so depressed she thought once or twice of taking her own life. She couldn't get out of bed.

Then one day, Grizzly rooted around in the closet till he found one of Lana's sneakers and brought it to her. Then the other. "I can't Grizzly," she said, "I just can't." But he tugged at her sleeve till she took him for a walk, then a longer one, longer and longer every day, stronger and stronger every day.

One day walking Grizzly through the park she saw a tall, blond, beautiful 17-year-old tossing a football; he looked just like Jeremy, and Lana thought her heart would break for good.

But Lana took some psychology courses at the University of Utah. Volunteer work was part of the course requirement, so Lana started taking Grizzly around to the pediatric ward at the University hospital. A young cystic fibrosis patient was screaming bloody murder about the needles they kept trying to stick into him, until Grizzly stood next to his hospital bed chattering away with his muffled woofs. The boy forgot about the needles. "Can I take him for a walk?" "Sure," said the nurse. "I'll push the IV pole."

Lana took Grizzly to a center for emotionally disturbed children to visit a troubled girl named Tammy. At the age of 11, Tammy had already been through fourteen foster homes and orphanages. She fought with the other children.

When Grizzly came to visit, she refused to look at him, so he left and stood in the hall, chattering to himself. Twisting the arms and legs off a doll, Tammy asked, "What's he doing?" "He's talking," they told her. So Tammy went out into the hallway to talk to Grizzly. "I'm scared," she told Grizzly. "Nobody wants me."

One day they noticed that Grizzly's eyes didn't seem to be focusing, so they took him to the veterinarian, who told them that Grizzly had been blind for years. "He sees with his heart, not with his eyes," said the vet.

The need was bigger than one German Shepherd could meet, so Lana started a non-profit group to train therapy dogs. Three years later, there were 91 dogs, three cats, one rabbit, and 80 human handlers. I'll bet you can guess what Lana called her organization, right? Yes, it is The Good Shepherd Association.<sup>4</sup> Grizzly, remember, was a German *Shepherd*. The Good Shepherd who looks for the lost until he finds them.

It's just the smallest earthly emblem, the vaguest human hint, the humblest harbinger, of the vast, spacious, relentless, irrepressible, searching, searching, searching love of God, who will simply never give up until the single lost lamb is returned to the flock of exactly one hundred—that perfect, round, symmetrical, complete number.

And at the end of the day, when the Good Shepherd returns home with the lost lamb slung across his shoulders, a gigantic party breaks out in heaven, because, thinks God, even if you have a hundred children, you can't replace the one you've lost.

"To Jesus, we are not  
bad, we are  
just lost."

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<sup>4</sup>Jo Coudert, "A Shepherd's Healing Power," *Reader's Digest*, December, 1996.

**—The Prayers of the People—**  
**The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster**

I carry now ten thousand prayers  
to your throne of grace:  
a thank you for the wide  
“flock of colours” (John O’Donohue)  
that folded night into day,  
a thank you for this staggering stretch of life  
received as gift,  
a thank you that on this day,  
we awaken to this absurd beauty,  
a thank you for the plenty and peace  
I find again  
when I stop whatever I’m doing.  
Clarity reveals an abundance.  
Beauty spills out.  
Another breath fills my lungs.  
A kind of peace reaches that deep down place.

Open unto us comfort and solace  
when the rough edges of the world  
bruise and break us.  
For the days when I need your consolation,  
when I need you to bear the weight of the world,  
when our hearts spill out with worry and need,  
be with us.

At times, our grief does not (cannot)  
decay and disappear,  
but is only rearranged.  
“The ghost of loss” (John O’Donohue) follows.  
Let the broken pieces fall gently.  
Let there be a soft landing place for our tears.  
Let us find a fluency,  
an articulate eloquence,  
for the sorrow I hold and the sorrow you hold,  
so that we might understand each other  
across the distance and find rest.

Be my rock and home, O God.  
Let something of your presence shelter me.  
Rearrange my worry.  
Find me.  
Hold me.  
Open my eyes,  
for though we never have enough days,  
we still have enough.

Hear the prayers of our hearts,  
spoken in the depths of our being,  
and hear us as we pray the prayer  
Jesus teaches us saying: Our Father... Amen.

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