

Scripture**Luke 15: 1-10****(NRSVUE)**

15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This one welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “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? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ 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.’ ⁷ 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.

⁸ “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Steve was twenty-four. Tatts covered his muscular arms from wrist to shoulder. He was a drummer. I had agreed to be his sponsor. After our first session working the steps together, he asked, “Hey, what’s that thing everybody says at the end of the meeting?”

Initially, I was at a loss. Then I realized what he meant. My home group always ends the meeting by saying the *Lord’s Prayer* together. Steve had never heard it before. I explained that not every group does this — and that it’s not a requirement — but that the opening lines of the Lord’s Prayer convey something essential about the sober life.

The traditional words go like this:

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.*

Here’s how I hear it:

We’re expressing our openness to what God is already up to. God is always welcoming us in a way of being ourselves and being with each other that we can’t achieve on our own. A life marked by joy and freedom, meaning and purpose that cannot be washed away by the changes and chances of this world. God does this because that’s simply who God is. Our work is to be receptive to it. As it turns out, *openness* to what God is doing is the welcoming spiritual posture at the heart of every spiritual practice.

Jesus illustrates this point with the parable of the lost sheep. God is the shepherd who will search for a single lost sheep even though there is already a vast flock. We are sheep who can feel lost and yearn to be found.

This is a story about welcoming the spiritual practice of repentance. And notice: it’s not principally a story about what the sheep has done. It’s about how the life of the sheep is transformed by what the shepherd does.

Jesus' first sermon amplifies the point. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). He doesn't mean that God will accept us *if* we clean up our act. Jesus means that, in him, heaven has taken the first step. The Holy has reached into our lives — welcoming us long before we realize it.

The divine has already come close. Repentance is our response to that nearness. To put it more plainly (and to echo Jesus' own meaning): "*God is breathtakingly close. Open your eyes. Open your heart. Welcoming God in will really change things — starting with you.*"

The word we translate as *repentance* literally means a change of heart. And here's the paradox of the Jesus-way spirituality: we become ourselves *by being changed*. Changed by God's increasing nearness in Christ. Repentance crystallizes the shape of all Christian spirituality: a pathway to openness to what God yearns to do in our lives.

As we actually taste the flavor of what he's teaching, we begin to see that it's not proverbs for daily living, or ways of being virtuous. Jesus proposes a total meltdown and recasting of our human consciousness, bursting through the tiny acorn-selfhood that we arrived with in this place into the oak tree of our fully realized personhood.

Jesus pushes us toward it, teases us, taunts us, encourages us, and ultimately walks us there."—Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*

"All throughout Torah (Old Testament), we find people looking for God, and not finding God, because God doesn't often conform to our expectations."—Lauren F. Winner, *Still*

Jesus's command to follow His way is a command to align our loves and longings—

- To want what God wants
- To desire what God desires
- To hunger and thirst after God
- To crave a world where Jesus is all in all
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Today's scripture is an invitation to wholeness or what we sometimes call salvation. It's not about being 90% or even 99% alive or whole. We are to look at the entirety of our life. Every sheep matters. Every coin matters. This is about wholeness and abundance, not as a quantity but as a quality of life. All are welcome!

The gospel of Jesus is not about making bad people good. It's about welcoming people back to life. It's a path by which we find ourselves. It's a call to wholeness. Jesus is always calling us back to ourselves, back to our wholeness. Our life's journey is a journey toward wholeness. And it is a lifelong search to integrate and live a whole life. In wonder, where are you on this journey?

Jesus said the shepherd goes after the lost sheep "until he finds it," and the woman "searches carefully" for the coin "until she finds it." ...***until they find it.*** There is a promise and a call in that for us too. The promise is that there will be a finding for us, a call is to search, and a welcoming as we find it.

Sometimes it's a call to light a lamp, sweep our house, and search carefully in the very place in which we live and have our relationships, the place that is well-known and familiar. And other times the call to wholeness takes us into the wilderness, into the wild and untamed or unknown parts of our life.

That kind of searching, searching until we find, is not searching outside of ourselves but searching within. It means searching until we value ourselves...

- beyond what we have done and left undone
- beyond what we have or don't have
- beyond our successes and failures
- beyond what is or might have been.

I don't know how or when that finding will happen for you, but I know it does. I've experienced it in my life, and I've seen it happen in the lives of others. That finding returns us to welcoming ourselves. I also know that searching and finding never ends. Friends, we have a continuing call to become more fully and authentically ourselves. That brings us to many moments of welcoming in our lives. I hope that you will welcome it, as we are welcomed in the Jesus-way. May it be so...Amen!