

older son! Through these stories, God offers an invitation to humility, to turn our hearts toward restoration and repair, and then to turn toward joy. To really celebrate the healing and restoration that's occurred.

Pastor Frances Wattman Rosenau offers a way to make this kind of celebration part of our everyday living. She writes about what she calls "found wallet syndrome." She says, "We're never more grateful to have our wallet than when we thought we'd lost it and then found it again. Ditto phones. Ditto just about everything and everyone we love...[So] What if we walk around not just with wallets in our pockets, but *found* wallets?"³ Rosenau imagines that we don't have to wait to lose something to celebrate the joy of having it in our lives. We can cultivate 'found wallet syndrome' about so many good things that are already found in our lives: friendships, purpose, worship, meaningful bits of time, connections with our community, not to mention sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, godparents, grandparents, sponsors, aunts and uncles. And maybe most of all, we can celebrate the love of our God who rejoices in claiming each of us.

Today, our community is having a celebration. It started this morning with breakfast in the Fireside Room as our Session welcomed twenty-five members who are transferring to this congregation from Drayton Presbyterian Church. Most of them are here today to share in the joy. There is some bittersweetness about this moment, too. They are coming from a church with a faithful and long ministry, having served God together in so many ways for so many years. Though Drayton has now fulfilled and concluded its ministry, the gifts of that congregation are not lost. Because those gifts, skills, and faithfulness are now found in new places—including right here, in the people who are taking the leap to continue their discipleship in this place. Together, we can all practice found wallet syndrome—celebrating everyday that, by the grace of God, we have each other; we are not lost and alone; we are now a new community knitted together in love. And so together, we rejoice! We celebrate! We abound in joy!

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

March 23, 2025

Third Sunday of Lent

"Losing, Searching, Celebrating"

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Luke 15:1-32

When we hear these parables, I bet most of us think a lot about the *things* that were lost. Mostly because of the names that we've long attributed to the stories: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. We imagine that those lost things represent a person who seems 'lost in life'—someone who has drifted away from family, made some poor decisions, or gotten caught up in harmful activities. Or we might imagine that each of *us* is lost in some way, sinners as we are. Whether it's us or someone else, when we return to God's good graces, there is much celebration.

A lot of good has come from reading the parables this way. But the way Jesus told them, the *subject* of these stories may not be the lost sheep, coin, or son. It really is the people who did the losing: the shepherd, the woman, the father. Jesus said, "What shepherd who has a hundred sheep... what woman who had ten coins... there was a father who had two sons." As professor Angela Dienhart Hancock writes, "Perhaps the focus of these parables is not on the person/things that got lost but on the person who did the losing. It is that person who turns around and scours the hillsides and pries up the floorboards and runs down the road. It is that person who repents, repairs, and then throws a party. Because when you solve a separation problem, you should celebrate."¹ God is in the business of reuniting communities and restoring relationships. God is in the business of drawing us close to the love and grace of God. And God invites us to be about ministries of unification and connection, too.

I hope that many of you are using our Congregational Lenten Devotional to guide you through this season. There are still copies available if you'd like one and it's also on our website. Church member Ken Millinger wrote one of the entries and he gave me permission to share his story with you today. Ken has a nephew Bryan, the son of his sister with her first husband. Ken and this brother in law had some good times while they were part of the family together. But eventually Ken's sister and brother-in-law got divorced. Since the divorce those years ago, Ken didn't want to have to interact with his former brother-in-law again. There was bitterness. In recent years, this separation caused distance between Ken and his nephew, Bryan. The two saw each other

1 Angela Dienhart Hancock, "Commentary on Luke 15:1-32 for March 23, 2025," *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/lost-sheep-coin-son/commentary-on-luke-151-32-4>.

2 Viewed by the writer on Facebook, November 12, 2021.

3 Frances Wattman Rosenau, guest post in The Blue Room email newsletter from MaryAnn McKibben Dana, October 11, 2024,

at a funeral in 2019. They exchanged phone numbers, but never got around to calling. But Ken missed Bryan and the good times with his nephew.

Last year, Ken realized he had lost something important in the relationship with Bryan. He was living out of his fear of encountering Bryan's father, which meant he was now also losing Bryan. Ken had received a handout in a church Bible study with suggestions from Pope Francis about things to give up for Lent. Bitterness was among them. "Fast from bitterness and fill your heart with joy," it said. Ken decided to try it; he turned his heart in a new direction, toward searching for and finding what was lost. Ken called his sister and told her emphatically that he wanted to see Bryan the next time he was in town. He was determined to rebuild his connection with an important relative. This happened because, as Ken says, "the Holy Spirit made me *search* my heart." And the Spirit guided his persistent search for what he'd lost. Ken's devotion closes this way: "I am planning a trip to Las Vegas later this year [to visit Bryan] when the rodeo is in town. I have always wanted to see a live rodeo and I can go with Bryan. I will experience joy as promised!" Ken will get to celebrate and rejoice, because what was lost has been found!

Ken's process of losing, realizing, searching, and finding is a lot like the ones in Jesus' parables. The parables paint different pictures of the valuable things each of us can lose: a core value or a piece of our identity that makes us who we are. Just as the sheep were part of the shepherd's vocation, maybe we have lost touch with a skill or a part of ourselves that used to make life good and meaningful. Or perhaps it is something of value that has turned up missing like the coin—the loss of time spent with loved ones; connection in community; or a sense of purpose in our lives. Finally, what we have lost might be a relationship, like the break that occurred between the father and his son, or like what Ken experienced. I would venture that most of us have experienced some kind of distance in a personal relationship, and the sense of loss and grief that comes with it. We all know it's complicated to restore those relationships. There are multiple interests and personalities at play; sometimes money gets in the way and when you make-up with one person that may set someone else off, like it did for the older son. But that father clearly wanted to share love and connection with *both* his children. For all three characters, their search turned their hearts toward what was meaningful in their lives.

Might Jesus be inviting us to turn toward God by considering a relationship we have lost? Or something important that we have let go of and need to recover? Perhaps he is inviting us to humbly acknowledge the places we have let a connection slide or have contributed to the break in of a relationship. No matter what or who we have lost, most of the time, we ourselves have had some role to play in losing touch with it. That doesn't mean it's our fault. But by our actions or inactions, or us just not paying attention, we may need to take some responsibility for what's gone astray as we prepare to recover it.

And once we do that, we can do what the shepherd and the woman did—go on committed search! Or we can be like the father who ran down the path to hold his son once more. Maybe Jesus is calling us to turn our lives toward the process of restoration—toward finding these important things that we have lost track of.

We don't always know if we'll find what we're looking for. But the parables show that the process of searching itself holds value. The process of seeking what is lost leads us to humility and acknowledgement. It helps us to reestablish what is truly important in life. And doing those things turns us toward God.

Sometimes, we do recover what's been lost! When we do, Luke is clear that the end point of the search is absolute joy! When separation is ended, we celebrate! When estrangement is repaired, we rejoice! When we reconnect with someone who seemed lost from us—at the rodeo, or anywhere else—joy abounds! We are urged to throw a party to celebrate!

There really is no celebration quite like the restoration of something lost that has been found. It's hard to beat the joy of a long-anticipated reunion! A couple years ago a post from someone named Richard went viral on social media about a search and reunion.² His family had been traveling in Iceland from the United Kingdom, and his young daughter Hattie had left her favorite stuffed animal—a cow named Cowie—at a campsite. The family were making a circle along their route and couldn't return to the camp once the loss was discovered. Richard and his family tried to get the camp to send Cowie to Reykjavik where they could pick him up before the flight home, but it didn't happen. He then booked couriers to get the animal and reunite it with Hattie. None of them delivered. In a last desperate effort, Richard made a social media post to the "Travel Iceland" Facebook group asking for help. Within a few hours, there were loads of comments. As Richard says, "Everyone was willing Cowie home and wanted to see it happen!" From there, one person collected Cowie from the campground. Another flew the stuffed animal back to London. Photos were posted of his journey all along the way. The final hand over happened at night in a local pub. When Hattie woke up the next morning and saw Cowie by her side, she was overjoyed! I can imagine her little squeals and her hugging him so tight she refused to let go. What was lost had been found. The search turned the hearts of a lot of strangers toward the joy of a little girl. Together, they celebrated goodness in a harsh world!

That's the theme I love most in these parables - the rejoicing! The person has acknowledged their part in losing something. Two of them dropped everything to seek out the lost thing, and then partied with all their friends and neighbors once they found it. The father took a bit longer to realize it, but boy did he celebrate when the brokenness in his family began to be restored. And he was going to have a new opportunity to do it all over again with his