

This is what I remember. I was in the shopping mall of my childhood. This was the early 80's, when shopping malls were still the town centers of suburbia. They were ubiquitous and popular, but they were hardly something to write home about architecturally. Two floors, a few skylights, and a bench or two huddled sadly around a slowly dying tropical plant. I remember a large, wide-open space with glassed-in stores on either side, and in the middle of that space, a tiny child, maybe three or four years old, standing completely alone. I remember him, standing there, on the white tile floor under the merciless fluorescent lights, standing and bawling his heart out.

These were not the gentle tears of a child who's missed his nap. They were not the showy cries of a child who's frustrated or annoyed and trying to make sure you know it. These were the belly-deep, all-consuming sobs of a child who is absolutely terrified. I remember him standing still, frozen in place, his face bright red and blotchy, his eyes squeezed shut as though he had long ago given up

looking for rescue. His distress was radiating from him in waves, a distress so acute that it was forever burned into my memory.

I remember, too, that I was with my mother, and I remember that as soon as I saw heard this little lost lamb, I felt her heart leap out across the room to him. She took my hand and walked up to him, crouched down, and began to comfort him. And I remember thinking, oh good. All will be well now. Mom is in charge. Thank God for those of us who had mothers who had us feel that way. I remember Mom asking him his name, but I don't remember his answer. I remember that he was able to communicate somehow - a weak nod, a particularly communicative snuffle - that he was, in fact, lost. And I remember my mom smiling and saying, well, now you're not lost, because I found you. And she took his hand and told him that we would take him to a place where a man with a special microphone could make an announcement all over the mall so that his mommy and daddy would know where to find him. He must have

been okay with this, because off we went, all holding hands.

It was at this moment, I remember, that two adults came striding out of the store on one side of the mall where we'd been talking. I don't remember exactly what they looked like, but I do remember that they looked grumpy. Don't worry, he's ours, they said, shaking their heads and frowning. My mother, confused, refused to drop the little boy's hand. He's been falling behind us all day, his mother said. We kept telling him to keep up and threatening that he'd get lost, but he kept dawdling. So we decided that the next time he got behind us, we'd just leave him and see how he liked it. We've been standing over there watching him this whole time.

I don't actually remember all of the particulars of this conversation. Nor do I remember the particulars of my mother's response. What I do remember was the very clear sense I had of a small volcanic eruption happening right above my head. I remember thinking that my mom was not a person to express anger easily or

lightly, but that in this case it seemed to flow out of her just fine, thank you very much. My mother made herself very, very clear – and I think it would be fair to say that she strongly disapproved. But then she handed the child over to his mother, him crying less loudly now, and we went on our way.

I found myself thinking of this story this week as I was contemplating the twin parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. They are, in many ways, the same story. Something is lost, the owner of that something goes to great lengths to find the lost thing, and when the thing that was lost is found, there is a great celebration. They are in many ways the same story, but for some reason we remember the lost sheep more often than we do the lost coin. There are certainly more sheep in stained glass windows than there are solitary shekels. Maybe it's because the scene of a sweet little sheep bleating its heart out as it stands stuck in the mud or twisted up in thistles is far more heart-rending than the idea of a coin sitting in a

pile of dust bunnies. Or maybe it's because the act of looking under a few rugs seems far less heroic than going back to the fields – in the wind and the rain, walking uphill both ways – to recover this darling little lost lamb. The lost sheep is cuter, the story more compelling, the point perfectly clear. Why the parable of the lost coin at all?

I remember reading in one commentary years ago that the lost coin parable was an example of Jesus choosing to use a domestic event in his stories, and not just a workplace one – a feminine setting, in other words, instead of a masculine one. There's something I appreciate about this, but this kind of “for the ladies” talk also reminds me of the scenes from *Mad Men* when they have the “girls” talk about lipstick colors and cold cream because how could they possibly understand what it was like to choose a car? I think there must be more to Jesus' story than just this. Surely women in first-century Galilee had every understanding of how valuable a sheep was, and how dangerous it was to leave 99 sheep unattended. Surely the

women who heard this parable understood it, pink cover or not.

It seems to me that there is a crucial difference between the lost sheep and the lost coin. You see, the lost sheep had agency. It had choice. It walked down the wrong path, or lingered too long by the still waters, or let his buddies talk him into trying to find a shortcut through the valley of shadow and death. Maybe he was dumb (we've all heard those “sheep are stupid” sermons, haven't we?). Maybe he was rebellious. Maybe he was young and silly and proud. But for whatever reason he wasn't able to keep the fluffy white butt of the sheep in front of him actually in front of him to find his way home. He got lost, and then he was found, and there was rejoicing.

Jesus tells us that this parable is to show how mighty God's forgiveness is in the face of sin, telling us that there will be joy in heaven over a sinner who repents. He says the same thing about the lost coin, but his metaphor is stretched precariously thin here. Because the coin didn't choose to get lost. The coin didn't roll itself

off the table and behind the water jug. The coin didn't wander off and find itself accidentally trapped beneath a sack of flour. The coin didn't decide, Pixar-style, to risk an adventure even though its fellow coins had told it not to go out at night and found itself kicked out the door and under a mustard tree. No, the coin was just lost. It didn't do anything; it didn't know how or why it was lost. It was just lost.

There are times when we make the wrong decisions and find ourselves alone in a place we don't want to be surrounded by people we don't want to be with. There are times when we sin, choose the wrong path, take a risk, forget who we are and where home is, wander away. But there are also times when we wake up one morning and just feel lost. We don't know where our connections have gone. We don't know how we've ended up alone. We look back on the decisions we've made and can't figure out how we ended up under the sofa cushions. We are lost, and we know not how.

Either way, Christ comes to find us. Either way, Christ

searches for us day after day until we are found. There is no moment when Christ will ever say, well, these 99 are just fine, who needs that troublemaker 100? There is no moment when Christ has forgotten you and started to talk like he only ever had nine coins in the first place. And there is no moment - no moment - when Christ is standing by, watching you through a plate-glass window and wondering when you're going to come to your senses. Christ loves you far too much for that.

So if you're feeling lost, know that Christ has brought you home today. If you know why you're lost, know that Christ has brought you home today. If you have no idea how you ended up alone in a dark corner where no one seems to be able to see you, know that Christ has brought you home today. If it feels like you've had trouble just keeping up and not falling behind your own life, Christ has brought you home today. Christ has brought you home this day. Now, friends and neighbors, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

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