

“Just Text Me”
Texts: Luke 15:1-10
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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 until he find it?

Luke 15:4

A cartoon in last week's *New Yorker* shows God seated on the heavenly throne above the clouds with a look of consternation on the divine face. Floating above the throne is an angel who looks infinitely more hopeful, with a scroll in his hand. The caption reads, "Perhaps more people would give heed to the world of the Lord if the Lord had a funny blog."

No one can deny, in 2010, that methods of communication have rapidly and permanently changed. One need only think of the new **verbs** that have entered our common lexicon in recent decades. Just a few years ago, the phrase "hold on, I'll just Google it" would have been met with blank stares or worse. In college, when I entered the Facebook world for the first time, I learned that the word "friend" could be a verb, as in "have you friended me yet?" Lately, it seems as if almost any noun can be, well, *verbed*. By far the most ubiquitous and striking example of this is the word "text." In my first preaching class at Columbia Seminary, spring semester of 2005, we were urged by our professor not to use the term "Biblical text" in a sermon. Why? Because "text" signified something static, arcane and lifeless. Texts belong in museums and classrooms, studied as artifacts by historians and scientists. The word was particularly poison for younger people in the pews.

How quickly things have changed. Now every teenager with a cell phone knows that a text is not arcane or static. Texts are traveling around the globe twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. Some of you, and I'm not going to name any names, are writing, sending, and receiving texts as I speak. You know who you are. The usage of SMS, short message system, has grown exponentially since the spring of 2005, and now, if you are using a cell phone, you are more likely to be texting than talking.^[i] Thus, the verb has come to stay. Just one more *New Yorker* cartoon, this one from the current issue. The scene is the hospital nursery. One newborn infant is holding, in his two tiny hands, what appears to be an iPhone. The bubble above reads: "OMG! I just got born!"^[ii] Just text me.

Now perhaps I am overly optimistic about this new development, but I think it represents a real opportunity for the church and our mission in the world. For centuries, people of

faith have been insisting that Holy Scripture does not just lay idle while we read and interpret it for our lives. Biblical stories don't simply say something to us, they **do** something to us. With apologies to my preaching professor, they **text** us, absorbing us into the narrative and opening up new worlds of possibility. Each week this Lent, we have been allowing the parables of Jesus in Luke to text us with some message for our lives of faith. These stories, we have found, do not describe the world, they create a new world and invite us to live within it, discovering a new perspective that can strengthen and guide us.

This week's story begins with controversy and, as usual, Jesus is right in the center of it. At issue are his eating habits, specifically those with whom he shares the table. It is not just that Jesus is eating with the wrong people, sinners and tax collectors, but he is welcoming them. I picture a high school cafeteria. Jesus is the one always inviting the **wrong** people to sit down next to him. Ignoring the great truths of adolescence: birds of a feather flock together, you are judged by the company you keep, choose your friends wisely; Jesus is spending time with precisely the wrong people if he wants to be recognized as a great teacher and religious figure.

In response to the outrage of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus tells a parable. Actually, he tells a set of three parables that relate closely to one another. They are stories of the lost and found. Lost sheep, lost coin, and finally, lost prodigal son. This morning, we read the first two of these parables. I'm wondering where you placed yourself in the story as it was read?

Perhaps you were the lost sheep, scared, tired, and alone until the good shepherd rescued you from danger, draping you over his shoulders. I have suggested before that the moment with the children is the most anxiety-producing moment in the worship service for any pastor. Here's an example. The pastor divided the group into sheep and shepherds. The sheep were invited to "get lost" somewhere within the sanctuary, and the shepherds were to find them. (I'm not sure who decided this was a good idea.) Anyway, it all went well until a while later when the pastor was partway into her sermon. It was then that a voice cried out from under one of the pews, "I'm still lost!" I'm not sure how gently, but this lost sheep was rescued swiftly by his parents. Sometimes we all feel like lost sheep in a world where isolation and distance seem to be the norm. We do need to be found.

Then there is the perspective of the ninety-nine sheep. The ones who were left behind while their owner searches for the one renegade. Why is there more rejoicing in heaven over that one lost sheep than over the others who stayed where they belonged? It is a good question, one that stands at the heart of the third parable in this series, the story of the Prodigal Son, the waiting father, and the frustrated older brother.

But these two short scenarios seem to have something else in mind. Notice how Jesus begins: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep..." The invitation is not to imagine ourselves as the sheep but as the shepherd. As Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, there

is the possibility that these “are not parables about lost sheep and lost coins at all, but parables about good shepherds and diligent sweepers.”^[iii] Maybe we are the ones who are searching?

“I’m searching for something meaningful in my life.” That’s how lunch with a good friend began a couple of weeks ago. Recent books call Americans a “nation of seekers.” Some churches have a special “seekers service” in which they open the church up for people who are looking for something. We’re all looking for a more meaningful life. We’re all searching for a greater sense of purpose. We all want to find what gives us life and passion and a sense of mission.

“Which one of you shepherds,” Jesus asked, “has a lost sheep? Would you not leave the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness and go beat the bushes for that one lost sheep? And when you find it, which one of you would not put that sheep on your shoulders and take the sheep back to your friends and say, ‘Come party with me. I found my lost sheep!’”

“Which one of you women, if you lose a coin, would you not rip all the carpet up off the floor of your home and move all the heavy appliances out in the yard, move all the furniture out on the porch? And when you have found that lost coin, which one of you would not run out into the street and say to your neighbors, ‘Come party with me. I found my lost quarter!’ Now, which one of you would not do that?”

Well, of course, the answer is none of us would do that. It’s impractical and lacking common sense. But this is a parable. We’ve just been texted. It *is* impractical, unless the lost sheep is far more than a dumb animal. Unless the coin that went missing is not just another nickel. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he finds the one pearl he has been waiting a lifetime to find, he sells everything he has to purchase it. Imprudent, yes. But this is the kingdom of God. When, after decades of searching, you find it, there is no cost too great.

These are not stories about lost car keys or a favorite pair of socks, or even a cell phone; these are the weighty things of life: faith, hope, love, friendship, vocation, a sense of meaning and purpose. These are stories of the almost unbelievable joy we feel when they show up again, under some long avoided pile of painful experiences or behind a barrier set up for protection from emotion. All those places we didn’t want to look or couldn’t bring ourselves to look and yet, when we muster the courage to peer into the dark corners of our lives, there they are.

I may be wrong, but I think that this is a major reason why you 21st Century, sophisticated, intelligent, busy people come to church on Sunday morning, choosing this over dozens of other options competing for your time and energy and resources. I think you come for that joyful moment when you find something you’ve been missing.

The theologian Karl Barth famously said last century that people come to church each week with only one question on their minds: Is it true? Is the promise of God true? Is

what we affirm true? The never-ending love and providence of God, the saving power of Jesus Christ, the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit, the resurrection of the dead, the forgiveness of sins, the communion of saints? Is it true? These may be among the questions on your minds this morning, but I would venture to guess they are not the only ones. My sense is that we come to this hour of worship with an abundance of questions and uncertainties and struggles and cares swirling about, like text messages darting through our minds. Where should we go to lunch after worship this morning? How will ever afford the exponentially rising costs of a college education? What will the tests result show? Why must relationships require so much effort? Is there more than the week-in, week-out routine of my life? What does the future hold for me, my congregation, the world?

Our minds are like crowded, noisy train stations and every time one fear disappears into the distance another is approaching. So much to keep *track* of in our lives, and we bring it all with us to this place. And then the prelude starts and the pews fill in and the service begins. Ninety-nine sheep on our to do list back home, and we have chosen to come here in search of the one that we've been missing. Can this hour of holy worship be the place to find it? The stakes are so high and the consequences so great, you can feel the weight of them in this room.

I have always liked Annie Dillard's suggestion that, "it is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should latch us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."[\[iv\]](#)

This is why we leave everything else behind in search of that one sheep; this is why we turn the house inside out searching for one silver coin buried under the couch cushions. Because we have found what we missing before, and we are determined to find it again. Many of you are returning to church or to active church life for the first time in years. Perhaps you hope to find something that you've been missing for a long time.

In three weeks, we will recall and relive the greatest lost and found story every told, when a few women, lost in grief and hopelessness, come early in the morning to anoint the body of their friend and the one they called Lord. What they find there will turn their grief to joy and revive their faith. We are not there yet, but if you keep searching, if you watch for signs and pay attention, you will be texted in the days to come. The message is hope for a world in despair. Take heart. What once was lost will soon be found.

[\[i\]](#) As heard on NPR's Morning Edition, 12-17-09 <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=121549494>

[\[ii\]](#) Both *New Yorker* cartoons can be found at <http://www.newyorker.com/humor>

[\[iii\]](#) Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*. Cowley Publications, 1993. p. 150.

[\[iv\]](#) Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row Publishing, 1982. p. 52-53.

