

I shared a story at Bible study this week, so some of you know this. This summer, I vacationed in Bulgaria. You heard that right: Bulgaria. It was recommended to me years ago. I decided this was the year. I had a wonderful time, but there was a language barrier. I rented a car for a couple days. This rental car company has offices all over the place. I picked it up in one city, drove it around, and planned to drop it off, the next day, in a different city.

I was told to drop it off at the airport. When I got to that city, for the life of me, I could not find the airport. It was probably user error, but the car’s GPS didn’t seem to be helping me. The Bulgarian signs, along the road, didn’t help me either. I kept trying one road, then backtracking and trying another. In fact, there was a rotary I must have driven around three or four times. I knew I was in the right city. I was relatively sure the airport was nearby, but I was lost. I just couldn’t find the road to get me there.

Eventually, I saw a car from the same rental company as mine. They all have the name of the company, in big letters, on the side of the car. This car got in behind me and it seemed to be following me. I thought, “Oh no. These people are trying to find the airport too, and they’re hoping I can lead them there. If they only knew how lost I was.”

However, when the road turned into two lanes, the car pulled up beside me. The person in the passenger seat waved at me as if to say, “Follow us.” I gave them the thumbs up, which is Bulgarian for “Thank God! I’m right behind you.” It turned out to be two employees of the rental car company. They led me right to the airport.

But that’s not where the story ends. Stay with me; I’m going somewhere with this. One of the employees took care of the car I was driving. The other asked me where I was headed. When I told him the name of my hotel, he said, “It will be expensive for you to get a taxi. I’m going in that general direction. I’ll take you there.” It was a kind offer.

While we were in the car, I said, “Boy, I’m glad you happened by when you did.” He said, “Yeah, we could tell you were lost.” I said, “Wait. You’re saying someone was tracking me. They saw I was lost and they sent you to find me?” He said, “Yes, we came out specifically for you.”

They were tracking me. They saw that I was lost. And they sent someone to find me. Is that not what our scripture passage is about today? A bit later in Luke’s gospel, Jesus actually says, “For the Son of Man [Jesus] came to seek out and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).”

In our reading today, the Pharisees and scribes grumbled at the fact that Jesus was spending time with tax collectors and sinners. These were considered the lost back in that time. Tax collectors were hated, because they collected taxes from Jewish people and paid them to Rome. The system was full of corruption.

Those designated as “sinners” would have included those who ran afoul of the moral laws: people caught in adultery, thieves, people with certain illnesses, those considered impure for some reason. They were lost, because they were assumed to have lost favor with God. Therefore, they became outcasts. They were considered unworthy of a place at the table.

It’s amazing to me that Jesus took an interest in the people others wrote off. God doesn’t just give us life and then say, “Your own your own. Good luck figuring it out. I’ll see you in heaven, if you can find it.” Even my rental car company didn’t hand me my keys and say, “We’re done with you until you get to the airport.” Whether they valued the car or me as a customer, they took an interest in me. You don’t send a car and two employees to congratulate focus who didn’t get lost.

God gives us life and then the tracking starts. Jesus illustrates the point in two parables. In the first, a shepherd had 100 sheep. That shepherd knows exactly how many sheep he has and if one goes missing, he knows it. That shepherd lost a sheep and he took responsibility to get it back. If even one goes missing, the flock isn't complete. Therefore, the shepherd seeks the lost and brings it back into the fold.

In the second parable, a woman had 10 coins. Again, she had interest in every one of them. When one goes missing, she turns the house upside down in order to find it. She even swept the floor. Have you ever resorted to cleaning in order to find something? It's one thing to visually scan the room, but if I start cleaning in order to locate a missing item, that's when I know I've lost something really important.

Both the shepherd and the woman take responsibility for the sheep and for the coins. I think it's amazing God does that for us. If God loses one of the flock, God goes after it. Each of us is so valuable in God's eyes, God will go to great lengths to get us back. God sent Jesus Christ into the world with the specific mission of seeking out and saving the lost.

Who are the lost today? One group of folks that I think about a lot are the homebound and those in assisted living facilities. The last few years has been particularly rough for that segment of the population. There's a lot of loneliness out there. Lonely doesn't literally mean lost, but it can feel that way. It can feel like you don't know where you have a place anymore.

I think of youth who have trouble fitting in or making friends, youth who are isolated, and who are overwhelmed by everything they have to navigate.

I think of folks struggling with addiction who haven't found resources to help them, people who may have lost a job or important relationships as a result of their struggle.

I think of folks who have been wounded by the church, people who don't have a community of faith as a result. You know what I say: There's no hurt like a church hurt.

I think of people seeking a place to belong. There were some visitors here at First Parish a few weeks ago. They told me that, whenever they travel, they seek an Open and Affirming church to attend. That's how they know a particular church will be a safe place for them.

I believe it pains God when one sheep goes missing. God takes an interest. The Lord goes to great lengths to bring back that which is lost, but the reality is God can't do it alone. Jesus gathered a community to assist with the mission. The question is what is our role in Christ's mission to seek out and save the lost?

The first thing that comes to mind is that we can track people. We have a caregiving team here at the church that has started reaching out to our members, many of which are either sick or homebound. It's just a way to connect with folks. Hopefully, it will mean something to those who feel lost.

It happens informally as well. A number of you have told me that you call so-and-so once a week just to stay in touch. Or you stop in on someone every so often, just to see if there's anything that person needs. That's something all of us can do. Who can you track, maybe a grandchild or a friend or a neighbor, so that if they take a wrong turn or veer off course, you can help them find their way back? Basically, if you see someone struggling, be the person to help.

Another thing I thought of in terms of our role in Christ's mission of seeking out and saving the lost is this: just don't get in the way. Do you remember why Jesus told the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin? It was because while he was welcoming sinners and eating with outcasts, the Pharisees and scribes grumbled.

Here's Jesus trying to bring people back into the fold, to restore them, and the leaders in the synagogue, the Bible toting Scripture quoting religious folk didn't like it. They were the one's that should've known better. That's not something to grumble about. That's something to celebrate.

After the shepherd in the parable finds the sheep, what does he do? He calls together his friends and neighbors saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." The woman who lost a coin did the same thing. She gathered her friends and neighbors saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost."

I can tell you some celebrating went on when I finally got to my hotel in Bulgaria. I can imagine my driver arriving back at the Rent-A-Car office and saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the American that was lost."

I'm amazed my rental car company did that.

I'm amazed the lengths God will go to seek out and save the lost.

That's no reason to grumble. Be awed by it!