

Thankful Memorial, Chattanooga  
September 11, 2022  
Thankful Celebrates! Sunday  
Year C, Proper 19  
*I'm a loser, God's a finder*  
The Rev. Leyla King

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28  
Psalm 14  
1 Timothy 1:12-17  
Luke 15:1-10

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

I'm a loser.

That's the title of an essay by author Nardi Reeder Campion, but it's as good a description of me as it is of her, though I don't know that I've lost quite as many things as she did in her life. Campion's list, at the beginning of her essay, runs like this: "Over the years I have lost keys, birth certificates, silverware, gloves (hundreds), lists (daily), checks, cash, glasses, engagement calendars (that's the worst). I lost a car title and registration, one dog, two cats, a leg of lamb (cooked), ration books (World War II), critical phone numbers, a fur hat, an automobile (towed), and, naturally, my temper." Her essay goes on to tell of two times in particular when she's lost two very valuable things: a wallet and a hearing aid. In both cases, she eventually found what she'd lost. And her joy in the finding was so great that she comes to the conclusion that it's *worth* losing some things, just so that you can celebrate the finding of them. "There are few joys in life that can equal finding a lost treasure," she writes, "and if it is something you can't afford to replace, the joy of finding goes over the top."

Campion's title for her essay, "I'm a loser," is particularly funny because it plays on the double-meaning "loser," in the sense of someone who loses things, and as the opposite of a "winner." We might similarly title the portion of the Gospel of Luke that we hear today as "We're all losers," because Jesus' parables here are about both those who lose things, and those who rarely win.

In the parables, Jesus doesn't call the opposite of winners "losers;" he calls them "sinners." But, really, in the way Jesus is using the term, "sinners" means much the same thing as "losers." The "sinners" Jesus talks about include "tax collectors" and others whom the religious elite see as outsiders. These "sinners" have so seriously broken religious rules, that the rest of their community has utterly rejected them. Compared to "the righteous who have no need of repentance," these people with whom Jesus shares meals are the outcasts, the disreputable, the losers of society.

And yet, Jesus eats with them, welcomes them, and promises that even these "losers" have hope in God. The two parables we hear from Jesus about the lost sheep and the lost coin are all about the ways in which God's extravagant love, God's unending mercy includes all of us, sinners and righteous, losers and winners. There is no wilderness in which you can wander, no nook or cranny in which you can fall, no sin that you can commit that is too deep for God to search you out, find you and carry you home. Of course, that way home is the way of repentance, of wanting to be found, but when it happens, when one sinner repents and is found by God, all of heaven celebrates.

This is good news for all of us losers. As the first letter to Timothy puts it, "the saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

But those aren't the only kinds of losers involved in Jesus' parable. There's another kind of loser, too, the loser who loses things. And I think that, if we can see ourselves in the lost sheep and the lost coin in these parables, we can also see ourselves in the shepherd who loses the sheep and the housewife who loses the coin. After all, like them, perhaps like you, I am often a loser. We lose lots of things: pens, wallets, cell phones – the list goes on and on. And, sometimes, we lose really valuable things, things that are truly irreplaceable. We can lose people we love and sometimes we can lose whole communities; we can lose our patience or our confidence; we can lose our way or even our mind and then we really feel like a loser.

But, you could say, Jesus came to save these kinds of losers, too. The hope and grace of our resurrection faith is that *everything* that is lost will be found again, that all of who we are, body, mind and spirit, will find eternal life in Christ, so even the people we have loved and lost are still present with us in the everlasting kingdom of God; even the parts of ourselves that we have lost to the ravages of time, sin and age, will be restored to us on the last day. And there is great joy in that, the joy that goes “over the top,” the kind of joy Jesus talks about when we will say to one another, “Rejoice with me, for I have found [what] I had lost.”

And if you're skeptical about that, just look around you, look at all the ways in which we are always finding, by the grace of God, what we thought was lost. Think of that friendship you thought was ended but that blossomed back into life when you most needed it, or the discovery of a way out of that situation that seemed like a dead end, or the ability to pray again when you thought you'd lost your connection to God.

Or, for an example that's personal to all of us, take this our Thankful Church. There have been times over these past 2.5 years when we may have felt like we were losing our community. Between the pandemic and the breakdown of our regular Sunday routines, between forgetting how we nourish and are nourished in this place and the myriad distractions and decisions that have kept us away, the Body of Christ at Thankful has sometimes seemed so fragile, so easily lost. But look around right now; see how God's grace is helping us to find each other again. See how we are finding a new mission and a new identity as Christ's church in this time and place.

Of course, even while it is joyful, the act of finding also takes our hard work and our commitment to God and to one another, to keep showing up, to keep investing in the vision of Thankful as a place of welcome and respite, to keep the faith. But, by the grace of God, we can and will keep that faith as we work together to build God's kingdom here on earth, with this little faithful community as our starting-place. And today is a celebration of that rebuilding and rediscovery. Today is about experiencing that over-the-top joy of finding what we have lost.

So, yes, we are losers, in every sense of the term, but with Christ, we are finders, too. We are losers, but, in Christ, we are found. We are losers, but through Christ, we become winners of everlasting and abundant life. And *that*, surely, is reason to celebrate. Amen.