

In the movie “Wild,” based on the book: “Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Coast Trail,” actress Reese Witherspoon portrays the real-life Cheryl Strayed, who spent three months hiking the Appalachian trail. Reeling from her mother’s death and struggling from addiction to heroin, she sets out alone on an 1,100-mile trek in search of answers, in search of self-discovery, in search of healing.

In her memoir, *Strayed* reflects on her early state of mind, saying:

“I was a terrible believer in things, but I was also a terrible nonbeliever in things. I was as searching as I was skeptical. I didn’t know where to put my faith, or if there was such a place, or even what the word faith meant, in all of its complexity. Everything seemed to be possibly potent and possibly fake.”

Later, looking back on her pilgrimage, she says, “I’d finally come to understand what it had been: a yearning for a way out, when actually what I had wanted to find was a way in.”

Seeking a way out. Seeking a way in. We are a society that does nothing if not seek. Seeking likes on Facebook and Instagram. Seeking notoriety on YouTube and TicToc. Seeking success in our careers and in academics. Seeking better fitness, better confidence, better relationships.

It seems we are a people obsessed with seeking. And if our nation’s \$10-billion self-improvement industry is any indication, we do far more seeking than actual finding. We appear to be, in some ways, perpetually lost.

It’s why today’s parables in Luke about seeking and finding may especially resonate with us: A wandering sheep. A single lost coin. Two parables that

immediately precede the infamous Prodigal Son parable—a well-known trilogy about things lost and things found.

Jesus' parables invite his listeners to become a part of the story. And how I relate often depends on what's going on in my life—depending on the time and the season.

For example, in years past, as a well-established member of St. John's in Ellicott City, I found myself shaking my head over the overflowing church at Christmas and Easter each year. Strangers walking in who I was fairly certain only came twice a year: people jockeying for seats and socializing with family members, as if at a reunion.

I would complain to my husband Matt about this, and he would reply that we don't know what one person might hear, what might bring them back, that it was not our place to judge. The response at once silenced my Pharisee-like grumbling.

Other times, I'm more like one of the 99: gathered in community and fellowship and feeling comfortable in my flock. Familiar faces, welcoming spaces, the camaraderie of shared ministry.

But occasionally I'm that One: wandered off, both in small ways and big ones. It may be an overwhelming sense of distraction from the busyness of career and ministry and family obligations. Or it may be the one brief but important moment that I fail to see Christ in my fellow human being.

Our sequence hymn, "Come thou Font of Every Blessing," speaks both to God's seeking and our propensity to wander:

*Jesus sought me when a stranger
Wandering from the fold of God
He to rescue me from danger
Interposed His precious blood...*

*...Prone to wander, Lord I feel it
Prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart, oh take and seal it
Seal it for Thy courts above*

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.

Like me, you may easily relate to various aspects of these well-familiar parables. So what fresh perspectives can we take away this morning?

Sometimes we can discover new insights by looking at the gaps in the story—at the information that's *not* provided. For example, we don't really know what causes the sheep to return to the flock.

Jesus says the shepherd carried the lost sheep on his shoulder, which almost implies a degree of passivity on the sheep's part. But we know God has given humanity free will, which since the dawn of time we've been exercising—often to self-destructive ends.

We see this reflected in our reading from Exodus, which speaks to the Israelites as a “stiff-necked people,” having acted perversely, worshipping idols, quick to turn aside from the way God commanded them.

We see this too in the violence of our world today, as well as in our self-absorbed and over-consumptive ways. This morning especially, the 21st anniversary of 9/11

reminds us of the evil human beings are capable of inflicting. Indeed, as Mother Marcia preached last week, we are absolutely free to make choices about how we'll live our lives.

So it follows that to be found, we must open ourselves to God's seeking. In other words, the sheep must reveal itself to its searching shepherd, allowing itself to be found and carried back to the flock.

What makes us turn back to the shepherd's voice? What is it that draws us to God, the seeker?

To shed some light on this, we might consider three things our readings today reveal about God's nature.

First, God's love is tireless. He spares nothing to go in search of us—a shepherd who leaves an entire flock behind in the wilderness to find one lost sheep. A woman who disrupts her daily routine and sweeps through the entire house, to find a single lost coin.

In today's Epistle, Paul too speaks to the tireless love of God, who strengthened him, judged him faithful, and appointed him to his service, even though he was “formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.”

Paul says, “But I received mercy...and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.”

Paul's testimony throughout his years of ministry assures us no matter what we've done or what we will do, no matter how many times we wander and become lost, in his tireless love for us, God continually, perpetually, eternally seeks us out.

Beyond this exhaustive pursuit, God's love is also radically *inclusive*. Luke tells us Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners—those who in his time were despised and outcast. Our parables this morning depict God as a shepherd, someone on the lower economic rungs of society. What's more, God is depicted as a woman, at the bottom of the social pecking order.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus taught time and again, through words and actions, that God loves *all* human beings, without exception. God seeks us all, God welcomes us all, God rejoices over us all.

Finally, our readings today speak to God's love being restorative—for the entire community, for his Church in the world, for the whole Body of Christ. In seeking out those who've wandered and become lost, God's concern is not with punishment or bringing people to face judgement. It's about restoring the community—bringing the Body of Christ to its full glory.

God's love is tireless. It is inclusive. And it is restorative. And so, created for *this* kind of love, we find ourselves responding to the Shepherd's voice—open to returning to the flock, to live in sacred community with each other.

A few weeks ago at our parish fair, one of the children in line behind me for the food truck asked, "Who runs this church?"

I spent a moment trying to discern the intent behind his question before I replied, "Well, Father Manny's the rector. He's responsible for the church."

The child persisted, “But who’s *in charge of the church?*”

The parishioner standing beside me wisely answered, “God’s in charge!”

As the child considered her response, I added, “God *is* in charge. But everyone here helps run things. The people own this church.”

The people own this church. Every single person seated here or watching online is an owner of this church. The church whose website states, “We are a Christ-centered, vibrant, multicultural, affirming parish...We happily welcome all people, without exception.”

People are seeking: seeking God, seeking love, seeking welcome. How will we the Church welcome them?

Today is the start of a new church program year, with many new and exciting things going on. New staff members, a new family service, a new—or rather an old—location for our 8am service, now in Old Brick. We’ll be electing new vestry members. We’ve begun new fellowship and formation opportunities, and interesting offerings like Theology on Tap. Why? Because we choose to welcome. To welcome each other, and to welcome all those seeking a taste of God’s love.

The kind of welcome reflected as well in our spiritual life theme for this year, “Be One Body in Christ, belonging to each other.”

With the school year ramping up and youth sports in full swing, amid our busyness, we can get distracted. We can end up mindlessly wandering. We can miss our invitation to God’s joyful banquet.

We can insulate ourselves with friends and familiar people, and sometimes unknowingly snub those not on the inside. We may raise our eyebrows at those on the invitation list. We forget to RSVP to the party, or we RSVP and don't show up. Or we show up grumbling—having been left with the other 98 in the wilderness, having carefully followed the rules like the Pharisees, having been long-seated at the banquet table, we forget to rejoice. We neglect to experience the kind of welcome and hospitality God wishes us to receive and to give.

But in the words of our spiritual life theme, we were created as one Body in Christ, to belong to one another, to sit beside each other at God's banquet table. And we could think of this party as more of a pot-luck—everyone brings something to contribute. We are both guests and co-hosts of God's great banquet, called, according to our gifts and talents, to participate in the ministries that uplift the Body, called to extend the same radical welcome that God gives, in his tireless, inclusive, restorative love.

Wherever we are in our lives, mired in sin, wandering in the desert, feeling righteous and holy, busy and distracted, isolated and absent, seeking or sought, lost or found, God extends us an open invitation to the party that includes all, that feeds all, that rejoices over every beloved and precious child of God.

There's a place set for each of us at the table. Jesus wants to party with you and with me. What kind of guests will we choose to be?