

[\[Link to audio recording.\]](#)

How do you react when you get lost? It doesn't happen to me often anymore, thanks to the GPS on my phone, but everyone once in a while by phone loses signal, or the address I type in is not actually the place I'm supposed to go. My reaction to getting lost varies. On my good days, I think of it as an adventure and laugh about the situation. I roll with the punches and eventually find my destination just fine, cracking a joke about why I was delayed. On my bad days, I'm a wreck. I get worried that I'm going to run out of gas without finding a gas station, or that I'm going too far in the wrong direction and will be far too late when I finally arrive at my destination. These are the days that usually end up in tears of frustration and hoping desperately for *anything* that will help me get to where I'm going.

I think that last bit is human nature: when we're lost, we will take hold of anything that might get us home: a sign with a street name that sounds vaguely familiar, a convenience store that we're pretty sure we had passed before, a car ahead of us that we think might be going to the same place. We put our faith in these wispy connections and hope for the best.

I can't take this metaphor too far without it falling apart, but there are so many other ways that we are lost. There are so many times that we look around and have no idea what we're doing, or who we are with, or where we are. There are so many times when the way forward is unclear or unknown and we are genuinely *lost*. Lost in our personal lives, in our jobs, in our health, or in our faith. Lost in the sense that up suddenly becomes down and east becomes west and nothing is clear.

When we are lost like this, we look for signs, we look for something to help us. Not unlike when we are lost while driving, we search desperately for *anything* that could get us to where we want to be, that is, no longer lost. Anything is better than nothing, even if it means doing more harm than good.

I think you might recognize some of these landmarks and signs we search for. It might be a friendship that we think can make us more exciting or more popular, but is actually toxic and harmful. It might be a job that has a great salary but causes us to compromise our values. It might be an abuse of alcohol or drugs which seems to make us feel whole in the moment, but leaves more damage behind. It might be a false gospel of prosperity which promises that if you believe enough, you will become wealthy beyond your wildest dreams, but has no words of truth or comfort when that money doesn't come.

Do you know what all of these things really are? Do you realize what these things become?

Idols.

When we hear the word "idols" we usually either think of a singing competition on Fox, or we think of our ancient ancestors in the faith who struggled and made idols when they were lost in the wilderness. God brought up the Israelites out of Egypt, but they grew restless.

They grew tired of wandering around, lost. They got fed up with their leader, Moses, and thought they knew better than God.

Then they had an idea: create a *new* god, an image of a calf that they can worship and make sacrifices to and then *this* god will help them find their way. *This* god, unlike the God of their ancestors, will save them from being lost. This was their idol, the thing that they loved more than God.

That's exactly what our idols are, too: things we love more than God, things we *trust* more than God. And so, when we're lost and we put our faith in alcohol or a job or another person or a false gospel, we are making these things *idols*. We are putting them above God. We are making God a secondary character and believing that our salvation can come from somewhere else.

I think it's important to point out that God does not take this lightly in Exodus. In scripture, we read how God is incredibly angry with the Israelites and plans to punish them with a wrath that will "burn hot against them." This is how seriously God takes it when we seek life and salvation from somewhere else. But Moses intervenes and pleads with God to have a change of heart. Moses *reminds* God of the promise that God had already made to multiply the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and give them land to inherit. God remembers this promise and relents...and God continues to remember.

God remembers this promise when the Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus in our Gospel text from Luke, grumbling about his behavior. They accused him, saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." This statement is supposed to be shocking, but for we who are followers of Jesus, it is no surprise. Of course, he welcomes sinners and eats with them. God made a promise to forgive, to love God's people, no matter what, and that includes people labeled "sinner."

I should point out here, too, because I frequently need to be reminded, that we are *all* sinners. This is not a distinction that we can use to separate ourselves from people who we want to think are worse than us. As human beings, we are simultaneously saint and sinner and have the enormous capacity for both destruction and creation in equal measure.

And so, when the Pharisees and scribes try to disparage and vilify Jesus by saying that he welcomes sinners and eats with them, Jesus doesn't let it be an insult. Jesus doesn't let them dictate what his actions mean, and he takes control of the narrative. Jesus tells the story of a lost sheep and the shepherd who goes off to find it. Then he tells the story of a woman who loses one of her ten coins and turns her home upside-down until she finds it. And he reminds them of God's promise of love and forgiveness, even if he doesn't use those words: "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

And there's more good news here, too! Not only does Jesus welcome sinners, as the religious leaders say, but his parables highlight the fact that he *seeks them out*. No matter who lost we are, no matter how many idols we may make for ourselves, no matter how bound in sin we are—God comes searching for us. God will turn the house upside-down to find us. God will search through hill and vale to track us down. And—this is the best part! —and when God finds us, there is not recrimination or condemnation, but *rejoicing!* God's reaction to finding us after we have been lost is not to punish us, but to celebrate and remind us why we need no idol when we have our God.

The Pharisees and scribes got upset because Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them...Jesus *still* does that. Every week. Every week at this table, Jesus welcomes me, Jesus welcomes you, Jesus welcomes *us*, *sinners*, and reminds us that we are never so lost that we cannot be found by God. And every time Jesus meets us here, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God.

Amen.