

Seeking the lost sheep: Exodus 32: 7-14

Psalms 51: 1-10

1 Timothy 1: 12-17

Luke 15: 1-10

by [Martha P. Sterne](#) in the [August 26, 1998](#) issue

*"The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners . . ." (1 Timothy 1:15).*

This is the time of year when churches wake up from a long summer nap and get cracking. Vacationers return and we are glad to see them and each other. Sunday school cranks back up and the teachers are busy organizing classes and greeting the kids. The choir starts practicing again after winging it through the summer. Committees begin to meet again.

It's very satisfying to look around and see the church doing what the church is supposed to do. The flock is in good shape. Lots of people are helping out with this or that, taking responsibility and sharing leadership. We are grazing in the green pastures right next to the cool still waters.

Hmmmm. Then these lectionary readings appear and there's a problem. These readings don't celebrate the flock all gathered together, grazing contentedly and doing the church thing. Instead, in Exodus, we hear about the idolatry of the first flock. The faith community is gathered together all right, but while Moses and Yahweh are hammering out the last details of the Ten Commandments, the flock gets restless, insecure and seems ready to worship anything. Aaron comes up with the golden calf idea and the community goes wild, which proves that just because you are in a group of people gathered together to worship God doesn't mean you won't end up dancing around with something silly.

That we are gathered together to do church is good. Not foolproof or idol-proof, but good. It is better to be gathered together than to be off alone, perhaps scared or despairing. Surely it is better to be gathered together than to be isolated doing your own thing, perhaps lost in indifference, never thinking about anybody else. Or perhaps lost in power, being controlling and ruthless to those around you.

Now here's the trick: We are doing church, and that's good. But we have followed Jesus in here, we have gathered together to be renewed, so that every week we can follow Jesus out of here--out to the school and the hospital and the bank and the office and the neighborhoods. We gather together here to follow Jesus, then we split up and follow Jesus out of here to seek the lost, the broken, the bleating, the alone.

Jesus seems to care inordinately about the ones who aren't here. This interest in the absent may seem unreasonable to those of us who show up and keep the institutional church humming, but it is the gospel.

Jesus came to save the lost--lost sheep, lost coins, lost brothers, lost prostitutes, lost loan sharks, lost jackasses, lost weaklings. Jesus came all this way looking for them. And those we have given up on or forgotten about or dismissed because of their unworthiness are the very ones that Jesus has headed out to look for. He looks back over his shoulder to see if we are following him . . .

Remember what happens everytime somebody who was lost gets found? Amazing grace. Celebration for all because we are so inextricably bound one to another, church leader to stranger, hungry to full, joyous to meanspirited, faithless to faithful. What happens when the lost sheep gets found is that the joy is contagious. And the 99 sheep have an excuse to throw a party, which is what we come together to do every week.