

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
The Rev. John Sampson
“Searching for What Is Lost”



Luke 15:1 – 10
September 14, 2025

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I had a great sermon planned for today. I was proud of myself. When you write a sermon, it doesn't always come right away. This one did. I knew what I was going to say. So early in the week, there was rejoicing in my heart because sometimes it's coming right down to the wire before I've got it all together.

And so today, as we hear this passage from Luke, we hear Jesus as he continues on his road to Jerusalem telling these stories, these parables about things being lost. You may know that in our book discussion group on Wednesdays, we're reading a book called *Tattoos.on.the.Heart* and it's all about those who have been lost and those who are found. And that was what I was going to preach about.

And then the world happened.

And so, the sermon I would have shared with you this morning is not the sermon I feel like I can share with you this morning because on Thursday, Charlie Kirk was assassinated and it feels like pastoral malpractice if I say nothing about that event.

Before Thursday, who had heard of Charlie Kirk and more importantly do you feel like you knew who he was? Okay, so some of us. I have to admit until about a month and a half ago, certainly since I've been here in Glen Ridge, I had no idea who he was, but I listened to this podcast that listens to podcasts across the political spectrum as a way to sort of get the pulse of what's going on in our political world.

They would always talk about Charlie Kirk and I didn't know who he was. So, feeling like I needed to be an informed citizen, I went to YouTube and I brought him up.

Charlie Kirk is known mainly for two things. One, he has a daily podcast or had a daily podcast. The other is he was the founder of an organization called Turning Point USA. He is a powerful figure, was a powerful figure in conservative circles. Very influential. Counts the Trumps as personal friends. When I listened to these podcasts to get to know him a little bit better and what he stood for, I found that I didn't agree with most of what he said, but I'm glad that I understood what he was saying. I saw a podcast with him and Megyn Kelly. I think they were at CPAC talking about Jeffrey Epstein. And then in another video of him, I don't know where he was, but he was talking about his work in Turning Point USA. Turning Point USA, for those who may not be familiar with it went very against the grain in our political thinking. It's often thought that the young are those who vote democratic. Charlie challenged that idea and created chapters of Turning Point USA across college campuses around our nation to welcome the young into the Republican party. There are chapters of Turning Point at William Paterson, at Montclair State. There's even been a chapter at Livingston High School.

And then on Thursday, addressing students in Utah, he was gunned down.

It is into this moment of our history that we hear these words of Jesus, these parables of losing something valuable, meaningful, and of the active act, the activity of finding, of searching for that which has been lost, not simply sitting back and hoping that someday what is gone shall return.

I know I feel this way and I think many of you feel this way too. It feels like the country we knew has been lost. A country in which we had a civil discourse. We didn't have to agree, but we could be in conversation, meaningful conversation with one another. A country for many, many years where we did not have to worry about political violence, about acts of aggression that attempt to silence those who believe and vote differently than we do.

Now, I do believe that these things break across our nation in different ways for different groups. I think if you were to ask some minority communities, do they know about political violence? Do they know about intimidation? Do they know about the disenfranchisement of their vote? They might say, "We know all about it." But for many of us, that has not been our experience. And this is a rude awakening to something that has been implicit in our nation since its founding.

Our nation as a nation of open dialogue, of disagreement with grace, of having a sense of being unified, a United States of America. For some of us, we feel it's lost. Or if we don't feel it's lost, we feel like we're losing it.

So, we hear these words of Jesus and again he talks about people, one a shepherd who has lost one sheep, another a woman who has lost one coin. And again they don't just sit around idly hoping that these things will return. They go out actively searching, perhaps even in the night, perhaps into dangerous locations, perhaps putting everything else down while they do this search.

Jesus asks us this morning, when you have lost something that is so valuable to you, what are you going to do about it?

For many of us, our response would be, we'll vote. That's a wonderful thing to do. We should be voting. We should be voting for people to lead us in the ways of peace and of brotherhood and sisterhood, of remembering those who it is sometimes too easy to forget. These are the values of the Kingdom. And we, the imperfect children of God, are asked to try with everything we have to put these values into practice.

But is voting enough? Charlie Kirk was not an elected official. Nobody chose him to be the voice of conservative youth through an election. The young man Tyler Robinson, who is accused of shooting Kirk, had registered to vote but had never voted. What happened on Thursday is certainly infused with political energy, but it sits outside of the world that can be easily touched through an election. To find an America that is slipping through our fingers on this day takes more than voting.

It takes a change of heart.

Remember that great commandment of Jesus. Love God with everything you have. Love your neighbor as yourself. How do we love our neighbor as ourselves if we can't even speak to them? If we won't interact with them? If we won't get to know them? Again, not to agree necessarily, but at least to touch their humanity and to have our humanity touched in return.

I think there are many options and I'm just going to share one with you today. There is an organization called Braver Angels which was founded a couple of election cycles ago. The founding group of that organization saw the division in our nation, the ways in which we could not speak to one another anymore. And they created forums for people across the political spectrum to come and to listen to one another. Again, not necessarily to agree, but to have a better appreciation for what people with different views might be thinking and why they might be thinking these things. Braver Angels hopes that we could turn from seeing people so different from ourselves as the "other" to our neighbors, and perhaps even more than that - to our friends.

I've known a number of people who have engaged with Braver Angels and have been in discussion groups with people very different from themselves, and they say it has been one of the most powerful experiences that they have had. Again, they don't come from these meetings necessarily agreeing with those who they've engaged with, but without exception, they see them as more human. Through this discussion, they have found something that they felt was lost.

It's interesting in the parables we hear what the owner does after they find what has gone missing. We hear what heaven does after what has gone missing is found. We don't hear about the other parts of those groups and how they respond. What was it like for those sheep when that one lost sheep came back? How did the other nine coins feel when that tenth coin returned? How would you feel if civility and a sense of unity returned to us? Wouldn't we have a party? Wouldn't we rejoice? Wouldn't we say hallelujah in the ways in which we can see each other's humanity more deeply? The ways in which peace could break out in our nation in ways that seem lost for many, many years now.

If this all happened, wouldn't heaven rejoice, too? Amen.