

“Lost and Found”

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Luke 15:1–10 (NRSV)

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable.”

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.”

The Parable of the Lost Coin

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Two years ago, in September 2020, I received a letter from a woman named Phyllis Zegers, in Oregon:

“Hi, Laurel.

First I want to apologize if this letter is intrusive or inaccurate. From my research it appears you are the great-grandniece of William Elmer Cline. He was born in Pennsylvania about 1861 and died at the Oregon State Hospital in Salem, Oregon, on June 26, 1939. He was the brother of your great-grandfather Martin L. Cline and the uncle of your grandmother Nettie Matilda Cline Toliver.

William’s ashes are being held at the Oregon State Hospital and can be claimed by any relative. As a genealogy hobbyist I am working with the hospital to let relatives know where the ashes are in case they would like to receive them. I have enclosed a hard copy of the death certificate and biography. In case you are interested in claiming the ashes, I have also included the request form. Ashes requested in the next nine months will be sent in September 2021 at no charge.

I’d be glad to answer any questions you might have or help in any way I can. Please feel free to share this letter with any relatives who may be interested.”

Phyllis' research shows that William was the younger of two boys, and moved with his family from Pennsylvania to Kansas in the 1870s. Sometime in the 1880s, William moved west, and although his family knew he was in Idaho at the turn of the century, they lost touch with him. According to census records, he lived in Idaho, Washington State, and finally, in a boardinghouse in Portland, Oregon. He was admitted to the Oregon State Hospital, a residential facility for the treatment of people with mental illness, in January 1939, and six months later, he died of high blood pressure and heart problems there at the hospital. He was 77 years old. As far as anyone knew, he never married or had children.

Why did William leave home, and what did he do all those years? What led to his entering a state mental hospital? I will likely never find out, but his story touched my heart. Although my mother had done some genealogy work decades ago, before the internet and resources such as Ancestry.com, whatever records she made are in a box in my sister's basement. I admit I didn't pay much attention at the time, so I can't say whether she ever mentioned William.

Phyllis also sent copies of her letter and the documents to my siblings and cousins. After checking with them, I sent her a note to thank her and to tell her I was sending for the ashes. I told her I too had left the Midwest as a young adult and made my way to the Pacific Northwest, that I had lived in Seattle for many years and was now in Maine. "Perhaps like me," I said, "William was drawn to a landscape of pine trees and rocky coast. It makes me think he'd be OK with being here."

I filled out the request form and sent it to the hospital. I soon got an email from someone there explaining that the cremated remains are housed in a permanent memorial on the hospital grounds. Each September, they open the columbarium that is part of the memorial, where the ashes are stored, and remove the urns of those whose families have claimed them in the previous year so that they can be picked up or mailed to them. The email went on to say, "We will contact you as soon as we have specified the removal date for next September."

Sure enough, in September 2021, a year later, another email came. "Thank you for your request to claim the cremated remains of your loved one. ... We plan to mail them via United States Postal Service Express Mail on September 28, 2021." The note also said the hospital holds a ceremony each September to honor the lives of those who passed away while living there and whose cremated remains were never claimed. Because they couldn't hold an in-person gathering during Covid, they filmed the ceremony and included a link to it in their email.

And a few weeks later, in early October, I got a notice from the Machias Post Office that I had a box from Oregon waiting to be picked up. Eighty-three years after his death, and after moving from Pennsylvania to Kansas to Idaho to Washington to Oregon, William Elmer Cline had arrived in Maine. Come to think of it, he was probably as surprised as I was. As I placed the box on the car seat next to me, I felt an unexpected wave of tenderness toward this unknown relative who had been lost to his family for so long. "Thank you, God," I said. And then, "Let's go home, William. Let's go home."

Inside the box was a ceramic canister with William's ashes but also the copper urn that had held them for years. I've since found out that identical copper urns were used to house the remains of

nearly 3600 people who died at the hospital between 1914 and 1973. They were stored in a nondescript building on the hospital grounds, largely forgotten until 2004, when Oregon's state senate president was given a tour of the grounds and the building was opened for the first time in many years. On a table there was still a book where someone had recorded each person's name and a number corresponding to a number on their urn.

This is William Elmer Cline's urn. On the top is painted the number 2383. As you can see, the copper oxidized over the years, and there was some water damage. I think it's unusually beautiful. In fact, a book of poignant but gorgeous photographs of the urns has been published, and a brief documentary has been made about this part of the hospital's history.

I am keeping William's ashes until I have a clearer sense of what to do with them and how best to honor him. But in the meantime, I often think about Phyllis Zegers and the countless hours she has dedicated to reuniting people with the ashes of their family members, a project she's been working on since 2013. In the latest figure I saw, the remains of 894 people had been claimed.

According to the hospital superintendent, people's ashes went unclaimed for a number of reasons. Some families couldn't afford a burial, so the hospital went ahead and cremated them, and their urn took its place alongside the others. Sometimes the hospital simply had no contact information—so they had no one to notify when the resident died. It sounds like that's what happened with William. Sometimes the stigma of mental illness kept families from even acknowledging the patient's existence.

In a brief article on the project website, Phyllis said she finds satisfaction in helping people connect with long-lost family members and solve family mysteries. For example, people who were told their grandmother died in childbirth find out she was actually institutionalized. Or people are finally able to identify someone in an old family photo. Others are able to forgive a relative because they now understand that the person was struggling with mental illness.

I'm sure Phyllis does indeed find that gratifying. But I'm convinced that her work is motivated by great love and compassion for not only the residents whose ashes were left at the hospital, but their families. Many of the residents were neglected and forgotten in life—"put away." And for decades, they were neglected and forgotten in death.

I think what Phyllis is doing is holy work. Beyond reuniting residents' ashes with their families, she is helping to ensure that no one is unacknowledged or forgotten, that each person is included and treated with dignity and respect.

In this passage from Luke that Laura read for us, Jesus uses the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin to illustrate God's tireless and never-ending efforts to find us and restore us to the Divine Source. God never stops seeking us when we are lost, never gives up hope. And although we may squirm a little when we hear the word *sinner* in these verses, remember that sin is not about the mistakes we make as individuals so much as it's about what separates us from God.

The sheep in this story didn't behave badly. You can't really blame a sheep for wandering off. And certainly the coin didn't do anything "wrong." The sheep and the coin were lost. The

shepherd and the woman don't scold them or correct them or ask them where they've been all this time. And in fact the shepherd picks up the sheep and carries it home, like a loving parent; he doesn't herd it home or even make it walk. These stories don't say anything about blaming or judgment—or even forgiveness, for that matter. Like the shepherd and the woman, God is much more interested in recovering and reclaiming us. These are stories about God's deep and unending love.

We may not like to think of ourselves as a “sinner,” although we'll probably all admit we sometimes do bad things. But if sin refers to separation from God, we are all “lost” in some way at different times in our lives. Frederick Buechner writes that sin is anything that widens the gap between you and God, you and others, and you and your best self.

We can let our preoccupation with worrying about the future separate us from the assurance of God's care. Maybe we work hard and are successful in our career, but we still feel lost, without a true sense of direction or meaning. Maybe we manage our day-to-day life just fine on the outside, but we're still lost in the depths of grief or despair. We can be so busy and productive that we don't take the time to talk to God, or we fail to notice the beauty of the world, or we don't take care of our relationships with our loved ones. We can be financially secure and still be lost in anxiety. Self-hatred can separate us. So can resentment that goes unresolved, unhealed, unforgiven.

But no matter how we're lost, or for how long, God will keep trying to find us—and not only that, but Jesus tells us that God rejoices when we are found, no questions asked. In his stories, both the shepherd and the woman invite their friends and neighbors to share their joy at the return of that which has been lost. The invitation to “Celebrate with me” makes this a community event. We rejoice together. We celebrate and are celebrated.

The lost sheep and the lost coin are found and restored so that they too can join the Beloved Community that Jesus has called together. In her writing on this passage, the Rev. Carrie Bail points out that the number 99 is a number of incompleteness. Finding the one lost sheep makes the flock whole, just as finding the one lost coin completes the set of ten. As people of God, we are incomplete until everyone is welcomed home, included, drawn into the circle of safety and acceptance, even those we don't agree with or like very much. Even those who have been “put away,” out of our sight.

I didn't know my great-great-uncle William Elmer Cline had been lost to his family—to my family. I don't know what caused him to spend the last months of his life in a mental hospital, or how long he had been lost to whatever landed him in there. But thanks to Phyllis Zeger's dedication, compassion, and love, he has been acknowledged and claimed. Celebrate with me!

My friends, God's divine love is unconditional, and it's for every single one of us. Know that God will never give up looking for you when you are lost, and God will always, always welcome you and celebrate when you are found. Let us rejoice in that knowledge and rejoice that we are together. Thanks be to God.