

“Finding God”
July 5, 2026

Luke 15:1-10

A few months ago, I mentioned in a sermon that my uncle died out in California. Family and friends gathered at Stanford Memorial Church to honor his life back in May. Then on Wednesday of this week there was another event at the Abernethy family summer cottage up in Deering, New Hampshire, where we buried my uncle's ashes.

“Deepwood” as the summer cottage is aptly named, was built in 1930 on the Deering Reservoir. And it sits on a piece of property where it's surrounded by tall pine trees, which provided mild relief from Wednesday's ninety+ degree heat. The intriguing part of the day for me, however, came when we buried my uncle's ashes in the ground.

My uncle had a father, my Abernethy grandfather, who was an ordained American Baptist pastor and a long-time chaplain at Rutgers University. In fact, there are clergy in the extended Abernethy family that go back a number of generations. And my uncle, when I was a student at Stanford, went to church regularly. More than once, I can remember hearing him sing in the choir at his nearby Presbyterian church.

In recent years, though, my uncle was open and honest about the fact that he no longer believed in God. I never had a conversation with my uncle about the subject, but he would often reiterate the point in his yearly Christmas letters and other correspondences. My uncle was so adamant about his conviction that he made it clear to family and friends he wanted no references to God mentioned in any of his memorial services.

It's not my place to judge my uncle's belief or lack of belief, even though I may not understand it. In my profession, I've heard from a number of people over the years that they have stopped believing in God. What I've always found fascinating, however, are people who go from believing to unbelieving without some recognizable trauma or series of traumas in their lives that cause them to call God's existence into doubt...

From my own personal perspective. I've concluded over the years that belief in God is primarily an intellectual exercise, based on whether the idea or the reality of God has any rational basis. My uncle was a scholar or an academic as much as he was anything else in his life. So it stands to reason for me, at least, that he gave the issue a lot of thought and decided he could no longer comprehend whether God was real or not.

Having faith in God, though, is different from whether we believe in God. Faith is about what we trust in our heart and what we sense deep down in our gut. Faith can't be measured by what we think we understand in our minds. Faith is something we lean on because we have experienced and felt the love of God at different points in our lives, during good times and bad...

I'll come back to the notion of belief versus faith in a sermon another time. What I want to focus on this morning instead has to do with the nature of God as it's revealed in this morning's Scripture lesson.

This morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke consists of two parables told by Jesus. In the first parable, a shepherd who has a hundred sheep learns that one of those sheep has gone astray. Whereupon the shepherd immediately abandons the ninety-nine sheep, leaving them to their own devices unattended. While he goes in search of the one lost sheep until he finds it.

When the shepherd finds that one sheep, he slings it across his shoulders and hastily returns home. Only to discover that while he has been away, he has fewer sheep than when he started. (Okay, that part is not actually in the parable.) But why would anyone in their right mind leave ninety-nine sheep unprotected and unaccounted for while they go off in search of one sheep who has left the flock? As the saying goes these days, that math ain't mathin.

Then to top it off, when the shepherd finds his one lost sheep, he gathers a whole bunch of people together to celebrate. Leaving anyone who hears the parable wondering why you would celebrate an accomplishment that was not worth trying to achieve in the first place...

In the second, even shorter parable, a woman loses a coin. Whereupon she proceeds to upend her entire house. She moves the furniture out of the living room. She carefully maneuvers any appliances she has out onto the front lawn. She rolls up the carpet and sticks it in a corner. And lo and behold she finally finds the coin she has lost.

Not content to keep her happiness to herself, the woman quickly calls over all her neighbors. She throws a grand party. And when all those guests squeeze their way into her house, the woman holds up her coin in triumph, as if she has found the most valuable coin on the entire planet. When her good fortune was probably more akin to someone finding a quarter on the side of the road.

Who would do that? It's a lot like the story of the lost sheep because the truth is none of us would. Throwing a grand party for a seemingly insignificant reason would be irrational and a waste of time...

Then again, here is the basic truth about the stories Jesus told. Jesus didn't tell parables in order for you and me to better understand ourselves. Jesus told parables throughout the Gospels in order for you and me to better understand God.

All of which brings me back to my uncle and the question of what it means when we say we no longer believe in God. I wonder whether he was asking the wrong question. Or never mind singling my uncle out, maybe most people are asking the wrong question. The question isn't whether we believe in God, but rather whether God believes in us.

In my mind that question is answered clearly in this morning's parables. God never stops believing in you and me. Even when you and I come to the point where we're not sure about God. And we start to call what we've learned and what we've experienced and what we assumed into question. In the end, I'm convinced God believes in human beings all the way through our lives in this world. And even into our eternal lives in the world beyond this one.

In fact, God believes in you and me so much that God is willing to seek us out and pursue us relentlessly when we are lost. When we doubt. When we're lonely and we can't find our way. God's love for each one of us is so generous and so expansive and so unconditional that God will hound us with singular focus in an effort to find us. Even if it means leaving the rest of God's flock behind. Even if it means taking all the furniture and the rugs out of the house and sweeping every inch of the house in order to find us. Even if it doesn't make sense and seems way over the top.

You and I worship a God who will go to unheard of lengths to reach out to us. To intrude in our lives. To search for us in an effort to save us. Whether we say we believe in God or not.

Noted author and longtime Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, Rev. Dr. William Willimon, tells the story of meeting with one of his students at the end of a semester one year. The student told Will Willimon that he was in trouble with his parents because his direction in life had changed. No longer on his way to grad school, as his parents expected, this student decided to head to Soweto in South Africa instead, where he planned to work directly with the poor.

It turns out the previous summer this student was in Soweto and God had gotten a hold of him. Actually, the student confessed to Willimon that God had made his life miserable for a whole semester. Holding onto his heart and spirit and refusing to let go.

Dr. Willimon, in his own unique pastoral style, decided to pose a few questions to this student. "How do you get along with your parents? Have you tried dating someone? What did you eat for dinner last night?" And after about an hourlong conversation, Dr. Willimon could not come up with any rationale for the student's sudden change in course. No reasonable explanation and no psychological or physiological cause for his dramatic shift in life direction.

In the end, Dr. Willimon was forced to conclude, "Well, I guess Jesus Christ really has risen from the dead is loose, up to his old tricks."

(Rev. Dr. William Willimon, "More God Than We Want", the final sermon in the book, *Preaching in the New Millennium*, ed. Frederick J. Streets, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, pg. 138.)

A God who is willing to any lengths to find you and me no matter what we say or think or do? That's the kind of God I want to have faith in...even if there might be times in life when my belief wavers. Amen.

