

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you. 1 St. Peter 5:6

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It was 1938. Jesse Taylor Mattos had just graduated from high school. And, as a reward for all of the hard work that had gone into that, he purchased a class ring. But, while at work almost immediately after graduating, he accidentally flushed his new ring down the toilet. Just like that. No doubt lamenting the \$29 that it had cost; which, as you can imagine, was a lot of money back in 1938. But there's no use crying over spilled milk, as the old saying goes; or no use crying over flushed rings. So, he carried on with life: he moved hundreds of miles away; went off to fight in the war; got married; had a family; and settled down to life. All of which he did without his shiny graduation ring. After a while not giving it a second thought.

It was 2010. Seventy-two years later. And Tony Congi is going about his business as a city worker in the sewer system, doing routine maintenance, when he notices something shiny in a pile of sludge.¹ He pulls it out; and, after cleaning it up, he notices the "Class of 1938" inscription and the initials "J.T.M." So he decides to head off to the local high school, checks out the yearbook, and discovers the name Jesse Taylor Mattos, the only graduate that year with the initials "J.T.M." But what would be the chances, he imagined, that he'd every find him; that Mattos hadn't lost all his connections to his hometown; or even, after 72 years, that he'd even be still alive? Well, as it turned out, pretty good. Congi made a call to a neighbour who was also from the Class of 1938, who happened to know Mattos well. And a few days later, Tony Congo was able to give back a ring that had been lost 72 years earlier.²

A nice story about the lost being found. In this case not lost sheep or lost coins but a gold ring. But, like that lost coin in this week's Gospel, a ring doesn't know that it's lost. And it's no better or worse off for being lost. It just sits there, in a pile of sludge, until someone finds it; or doesn't find it, as the case may be. But what about us. What happens when we're lost, and we don't it? What are the risks for us in that? Well, ask Donna Cooper.

On a hot July day in 2010 she and her daughter Gina and a friend set out for a day trip to a museum in Death Valley. They packed enough food and water for the day; and they took along "Nell," as they called their trusty GPS device. All went well; and at the end of the day they set off for home. But on the way they saw a sign for another attraction, and they took a quick detour. Which was their first mistake. They went off-highway along dirt toads and, when they failed to locate the attraction, they turned around. Which didn't go well. So, figuring that they needed a little help, they turned on the GPS, trusting that "Nell" would be able to get them back. But without them knowing it, Nell proved even more confused than they were, taking them further into the desolation that is Death Valley; telling them to go this distance and turn, and another distance and turn. And so on and so on. Until they drove beyond the range of cellular service; and then ran out of gas. In Death Valley. In July. When the temperature can hit 57 degrees Celsius. That's 134 on the old scale, just in case you were wondering. In a place that got its name when a group of prospectors on the way to the gold rush in 1849 took a short cut and died.³ That Death Valley. But fear not. In the end this story worked out just fine. By the Grace of God.⁴ When they failed to show up on

1 <https://www.mercurynews.com/2011/05/23/ring-finds-owner-72-years-later/>

2 <https://abcnews.go.com/US/72-years-lost-high-school-ring-returned/story?id=13673640>

3 <https://www.nps.gov/deva/learn/historyculture/index.htm>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_Valley

4 Lost, and without cellphone service, the three women ran out of gas after about 100 miles. The temperature began to drop as night fell. Running out of water, they settled in for an uncomfortable night. The next morning, Gina urged her mom to try the car one

time, their family contacted the Highway Patrol; and after three very frightening days, they were found. A little worse for wear, but okay. Thankfully everyone survived, except Nell. Their once-trusty GPS was retired from active service. To everyone's relief.

The Fifteenth Chapter of St. Luke's Gospel is one of the most remarkable passages in all of Holy Scripture. One story after another about things that are lost and found. As we hear this week, a lost sheep and a lost coin; and in the passage which follows, which we don't hear today but know so well, a lost son. Or, maybe, two lost sons. And altogether, these two stories have spoken powerfully for nearly 2000 years of the passionate desire of the shepherd, and the woman, and the father, to find that which is lost; a passion that defies reason; a passion that throws common sense and personal dignity to the wind in the pursuit of the pursued. They're stories that have held the power to change hearts and lives for as long as they've been told.

But what happens when we don't know we're lost? Or we refuse to admit that we're lost. Like Manasseh in this week's Old Testament lesson. What happens when we don't know that we're not on the right road? Especially in those times when we're not off-track by a whole lot but by just a little. Because, as we all know, if you're off-track even just a tiny bit for long enough, you'll eventually find yourself hopelessly lost. What chance do we have for our hearts to be changed if we can't see how our hearts need to be changed?

Case in point: the grumbling of the scribes and Pharisees in this week's Gospel which prompts Jesus to tell all these remarkable stories of things lost and found; the scribes and Pharisees who are pretty sure that they know best who Jesus should and should not be hanging around with. How will our hearts be changed by Christ's stories if we just assume that our hearts are okay? That everything's just fine?

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your care on him, because he cares for you.

Well, the answer lies in Peter's advice in this week's Epistle; and in a concept that we have little time for these days; at a time when admitting that you might be wrong is seen as a sign of weakness; in a time when doubling down is the instinctive response when someone has called us out; in a time when the most common response when you're wrong is to repeat the lie more loudly and more often until someone believes you. Perhaps our hope lies in humility; in our willingness to admit that maybe we don't know everything; that we're not always right; in our recognition that we need each other; and the gifts that others bring to our lives that balance and correct our weaknesses and limitations; in our willingness to acknowledge that we can't do it all ourselves; that we need help, from each other and especially from God; the very same God who passionately searches for us, and seeks us, even when we don't know that we're lost.

Your value in God's eyes defies all reason and all calculation. In God's eyes you are worth more than the sum of your parts. And he never stops looking for you. And calling you. And going out to find you. That he might carry you home. Rejoicing. And when we know that. When we know the never-ending love of this passionate and compassionate God as well as we know anything else, then life, your life and my life and every part of it, becomes immeasurably better. Because God is always looking to bring you home. Rejoicing.