

All week, I haven't been able to get one particular scene from *Lilo & Stitch* out of my head. For some context, when Lilo adopts Stitch, she treats him like he's her baby, she tucks him into bed, he has a bottle, filled with coffee mind you, but still a bottle, and she reads him bedtime stories. One of the books that he ends up picking up and requesting to be read is *The Ugly Duckling*. He turns to a page near the back where the little duckling is sitting in a clearing, rain pouring down, and he's crying. Stitch seems confused, and so Lilo explains that he's crying because he's lost. He can't find his family and he feels alone.

Fast forward to near the end of the movie where all sorts of chaos has broken out and Stitch has been kicked out of the house. In that quintessential kind of Disney magic moment, he finds himself in a forest clearing, rain coming down, and he plops down and just laments, "Lost." He finally understands the moment from the book, the intensity of that feeling which the duckling had. He realizes he has a family, he has people that he loves, and he just wants to be found, he doesn't want to be alone anymore. Now, I understand that this is a story from the perspective of a cartoon alien, but it doesn't make it any less poignant. Because honestly, it highlights a basic, fundamental truth: we all know what it is to feel lost, to wonder if anyone is going to come find you. It isn't just a human truth, it is a universal

truth, this feeling that Jesus is describing today in his parables is one that every single person in Jesus' audience would be well acquainted with.

We're coming off of Jesus' teachings about familial division and the difficulty of discipleship and so this feels a little bit like a soft landing.

Once again, Jesus has been doing what he always does, he is eating with those that he wants to eat with, he is welcoming those who have never been welcomed before. He is being the very definition of a safe space. No one is turned away, all are welcome, and the Pharisees decide to come listen to him preach, but before they even get there, the grumbles are starting. "Have you heard what this guy is doing? Have you seen the people he is hanging around with? Who does he think he is welcoming *these people*?"

Jesus is, of course, paying attention to what is going on and is well aware of their feelings and so he decides that this is the perfect time to bring out some parables of the lost and found. To a group who knows what the agrarian lifestyle is like, Jesus talks about a shepherd, a shepherd who has a flock of a 100 sheep, and as he is going along, he realizes that his 100 is down to 99, and so he doesn't just shrug it off and say, well, what's one sheep in comparison to this whole flock, instead he leaves the 99 and goes in search of the single lost sheep, not returning until he has found it.

He then tells a not entirely dissimilar story about a woman and her coins, even though in this instance it would seem that there is a smidge more at stake. A woman has ten silver coins, seemingly this is her entire life savings, and she realizes that one of those ten is missing. Like the shepherd, she doesn't ignore it and figure nine is as good as ten, she scours her house, turns it upside down until she can find that one lost coin.

What we don't get in this gospel is what comes next, because these parables are actually a part of a trio. In the third and final parable, the stakes are even higher than one out of a hundred or one out of ten, in that one it's one out of two, because Jesus follows these two parables up with the prodigal son. Who having two sons wouldn't fight for both of them to be back home, safe, happy, and healthy?

Each of these parables is trying to convey the same message, God will seek out the lost and bring them home, there is nowhere you go that God cannot find you, and I think we get that in the context of the coins and the kids, but it's the sheep that really makes us question things, because of all of these parables that's the one that doesn't make any sense. I mean let's think about this. You are a shepherd that is in charge of a flock of sheep, one hundred sheep are your livelihood. Everything in your life depends on the safe keeping of this flock, so when ONE goes missing, it seems completely

and utterly ILLOGICAL to leave the rest of the flock and go find it. You still have 99 sheep, sir! That's a lot of sheep, that's a lot of livelihood. Now, because of course we did, Bible study googled if sheepdogs were a thing in Ancient Israel and the internet was fairly certain there were, and from what we know of the Christmas story that shepherds tended to operate in small groups, not a ton of them, but a couple, so if we take all of those things into consideration, sure, maybe you leave the flock with the dogs and the other dudes and go find the lost sheep, but that's not what Jesus says. Jesus doesn't say there were others there, he gives zero context beyond one shepherd lost one sheep and he left the rest of the sheep, *in the wilderness* mind you, and went and did not stop searching until that sheep was found.

The lack of logic is the point here. This parable isn't about ancient shepherding practices. This parable is about how God feels about us. And it is completely and ridiculously illogical. I mean think about it, there are 8.2 billion people in the world, that's a smidge more than 100 sheep and God cares about *you*. There is nothing, nothing you can do, nowhere that you can go that is going to make God shrug God's shoulders and be like, well, I still have another eight billion people we can let that one go. That is how precious you are. Jesus uses the most ridiculous, almost roll your eyes at the absurdity of it all, parable to tell this group of people how much they are

loved and why yeah, he is going to buck tradition and keep eating with people the world deems unworthy and welcoming those that everyone has chosen to ignore for far too long.

I don't know about you all, but...I'm pretty much at peak exhaustion with the world. I mean in the last week, we have had another school shooting, another political assassination, the 24th anniversary of the terrorist attack that changed our entire global perspective, and then just countless other small things that have happened to each of us on an individual basis. Scully got sick in the house this week and I almost passed out giving blood, and I'm sure y'all got similar stories, so yes, exhaustion doesn't quite begin to cover the feeling. And ya know, Jesus' audience probably felt the same way. The Romans keep patrolling, roads into major cities are flanked by crucifixions, poverty is running rampant, and to top it all off one of them probably did have a sheep go missing that week and someone was probably fighting with their kid. Everything is hard. There's no point trying to sugar coat it, everything is hard.

And here comes Jesus...child of God, God will come searching for you, no matter where you go, no matter how lost you feel, no matter whether or not you feel worthy of being found, God is going to search and scour and turn the place upside down so that you know you are cherished, you are

loved, you are precious. Sure there are always 99 more sheep, there are always 8.2 billion more people, but there is only one you and that you is whom God created, molded, and declared you are wonderfully made. In a world of hard, I think we all need to hear that. Whatever wilderness you feel like you're trapped in, whatever feeling is roiling around in your head that says you aren't good enough, whatever hard is pressing down on your chest like a boulder, God will never let you go. God is going to keep searching and searching and searching and bring you back to the flock, where you know you are safe, welcome, and beloved.

And the thing is, you know how God does this more often than not? Through us. We are just as capable of going out and finding each other, reminding each other that we are precious and welcome and beloved exactly as we are. This world...needs so much grace. We, ourselves, need so much grace. There isn't a person you pass on the street everyday that doesn't need grace. There isn't a person sitting here today that doesn't need grace. That doesn't need a reminder that they will never be left to just remain lost. Don't let your siblings wander, don't let them feel like they have to hit some milestone or marker to be worthy, don't withhold grace just because it might feel good in the moment. Remember that you have been found, over and

over and over again, and then go out and search, diligently, ardently for those who just want someone to see them.

The world is hard enough, we don't have to lend it a helping hand. Beloved child, beloved sheep, God has found you and will shepherd you with love. Beloved child, beloved sheep, your siblings are sitting in the dark crying out "lost" just hoping someone will find them. Go out and search. Shove logic aside and say God's love is greater than what makes sense. Welcome them home, remind them they have a family, remind them that they are precious, remind them that you will always, always, always help find them, no matter how far they might wander. **AMEN!!!**