

## Sermon: Luke 15. The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

The thing about the two parables from today's gospel is that they are very familiar and we have known them since Sunday school. And we tend to think that we just need to master the lesson in the parables for them and us to set things right in our lives. But it just might be that we are altogether wrong in how we are understanding them. It comes as a surprise to realize that parables are not all about us. Rather, the parables of Jesus are primarily about the mysterious way that God deals with us in the world.

Jesus is a genius story teller, and each time you read the parables you will be surprised to discover twists and turns that you haven't noticed before, buried there in the familiar facts in subtle nuances and details.

Luke's Gospel relates three parables about lostness, culminating in the greatest of them all, the Lost or Prodigal Son. But today we have the lost sheep and the lost coin. Luke begins by saying the tax collectors and the sinners were drawing near to Jesus to hear him. The scribes and the pharisees grumbled about this saying "This man welcomes sinners, and he eats with them, and therefore he's a bad person."

By this stage in his ministry the crowds who flocked to hear Jesus were warming to the possibility that he might well be the promised Messiah who would fulfill God's will for Israel and do wonderful things in and for the world. But the Jewish establishment, the scribes and the pharisees saw his consorting with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners as outrageous. And it is to the scornful criticism : "This fellow eats with sinners and welcomes them!" that Jesus tells the parables of lostness.

Addressing them directly Jesus says: imagine you have one hundred sheep, and one gets lost. Wouldn't you go out after the lost one until you find it? Wouldn't you ask your neighboring shepherd buddy to keep an eye on your 99 so you could go and find the stray one? Well, what's the real, sensible answer to that question? The real answer to that question is "no, of course not." Nobody in his right mind who's in the sheep business has

one hundred sheep, loses one, leaves the ninety-nine to the wolves and the coyotes, and goes chasing off after one silly one that got loose. You'd cut your losses, write off the lost sheep, and keep the remaining ninety-nine safe.

So Jesus' question is perverse and even ironic. Who among you wouldn't go out and do this? Well frankly everybody wouldn't! And so he says, "And when you find that, what would you do with the sheep if you had actually done this?" Notice he doesn't say, "Then he goes back to the ninety-nine and gives this little sheep back to its mother sheep," Instead Jesus says he puts the lost sheep on his shoulders and goes to his house. He goes home with it.

In this parable, Jesus never goes back to the ninety-nine sheep. He has divided the flock into one sheep and ninety-nine sheep, and he's not trying to make two different groups : ninety-nine who don't get lost, and one who does.

It seems the real meaning of the one and the ninety-nine is that the one lost sheep is the whole human race as it really is. And the ninety-nine "found" sheep who never get lost are the whole human race as we think we are. The one lost sheep stands for all of us, and all God the shepherd wants is to go after the lost and bring them safely home. And so Jesus says, "I say to you that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." God in Jesus is only interested in finding the lost..

He follows this parable with the parable of the lost coin, and this time the God figure is a rather neurotic woman. As the somewhat crazy shepherd goes after one silly lost sheep and leaves ninety-nine to the wolves, so this woman is even crazier. She has ten coins, and she checks on them in her savings box every day. One morning, she finds one is missing and she goes into manic overdrive to find it. She cancels all her plans for the day, lights a light, cleans every nook and cranny going into every dark corner. She sweeps, and sweeps, looks under everything for the whole day until she finds this coin. And what does she do when she finds it? Interestingly, she doesn't put it back in the box. Instead Jesus says, she

gets on the phone to her friends and her neighbors and says, "Come on over, I'm going to have a party to celebrate finding my lost coin."

And the friends probably said, what, a party just because you found a coin? And she would say, yes, that's exactly it. And they might just show up but without much enthusiasm. But she has enthusiasm for it, and by it she proves something.

In the lost sheep, you can feel sorry for the poor, little lost sheep. Maybe it was injured or frightened. that. But you can't exactly feel sorry for a lost coin. A lost coin doesn't know it's lost.

But these two parables together say that what governs God's behavior to us is not our sins or our problems. It's his need to find us. The power of these parables is the need of the finder to find, not the need of the lost to be found. And the finder is God, moved by his love to find all of us in our lostness. The Scribes and Pharisees don't realise Jesus is directing his teaching right at them, lost as they are in their self righteous conceit and religious preoccupations .

We cannot get away from the love that will not let us go because God, the shepherd, and the woman of these stories, God, the father of the universe, never ceases to seek and to find the lost. Through grace we might have hearts open to being lifted tenderly and rested on his shoulders and taken home to be safe and saved from lostness, be it lostness of sin, sorrow, grief or straying in some wrong directions.

The hymn writer George Matheson wrote .

O Love that will not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in thee;

Going blind he was abandoned by his fiance who said she could not live her life with a blind man. Cared for by his devoted sister, on the eve of her wedding he wrote this hymn as he contemplated loneliness and loss of her in his life, and then his faith that God would

raise him up in His care and love.

. O Joy that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to thee;  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not vain,  
That morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,  
I dare not ask to fly from thee;  
I lay in dust life's glory dead,  
And from the ground there blossoms red  
Life that shall endless be.

AMEN