

# Wandering Sheep & Lost Coins

Luke 15:1-10  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Every time I hear the parable of the woman diligently searching after a lost coin I am reminded of my mother. The major difference, however, is that it wasn't so much her after something she lost, but rather her searching for something that my dad or one of us four kids misplaced. After the obligatory, "Where did you have it last?" she, with great patience, often dropped whatever she was doing and help us look. She was a great finder!

One of the hardest parts of being single and living alone is not having anyone else around to help us search for what we've have misplaced. Yet, because of that fact, perhaps we single folks experience even greater joy when what was lost is eventually found. **Experiencing joy in finding that which has been lost** is the theme in the two parables we heard from today's Gospel reading from Luke 15.

The assigned lectionary reading stops at verse 10, but if you read the rest of the chapter, you'll find these two parables are immediately followed by the very well-known parable of the Prodigal Son, another example of being lost and found. Perhaps the most common interpretation of all three of these parables – the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and what many are now calling the Lost Sons – is that **God never fails to seek and restore those who are lost**. When we're honest with ourselves, at one level or another, **are we not are all lost at times and in need of being found?**

"Which one of you," Jesus asks, "would not leave the 99 sheep and to after the one that is lost?" Truth be told, why would anyone leave the 99 in possible danger just to search for one that is lost? We learn God does not work this way. **The lost one gets preferential treatment**. God does not write off those most of us would deem at best unworthy, and at worst irredeemable. This is a story, therefore, of radical grace.

As with all **parables**, however, we may need to look for something a bit deeper. **For if we aren't particularly shocked by anything, then we have probably missed an element of Jesus' original point**. For you see, it's not hard to understand that God is joyful when a sinner repents. Repentance simply means to have a change of heart and mind, a turning away from harmful behaviors and attitudes and turning back to the ways of God.

But it's more than that. Perhaps the most shocking thing we learn from these particular parables is that **God invites the rest of us to join the celebration – to be merciful and accepting as God is merciful and accepting**. We tend to overlook the end of each of these parables. After the shepherd leaves 99 of his 100 sheep in the wilderness to search for the one that is lost, we're told, "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices." No surprise there. But it continues, "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 has been lost.'" So, too, when the woman (yes, a feminine image of God) finds one of her ten lost coins we're told, "She calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'"

Both of these parables end, however, without us knowing whether the friends and neighbors of the shepherd or the woman rejoice with them or not? **Often the point of a parable is the unanswered question that the hearers are left to answer for themselves.** Therefore, we are left to ponder: Would you, would I, rejoice with the shepherd or the woman over finding and restoring what was lost? Why is it so important whether we rejoice or not? One biblical commentator explains it this way: "I think this is a very important question for churches today. More than one congregational member has *not* rejoiced over the influx of new members in the congregation. The non-rejoicing criticism seems especially prevalent when the 'found' are somehow different from the mainstream members."

**Perhaps this is one of the major problems in declining mainline Protestant churches today – the inability to accept those who aren't considered mainstream, or in other words, just like themselves.** The all-too-common question being pondered is, "Are they *enough* like us so that we don't have to change or be uncomfortable in any way?"

In case we think otherwise, these parables are indeed a rebuke of religious-insiders – and by application in Luke's day, the church itself. In context, we learn in verses 1-2 that Jesus is keeping questionable company, for he associates and eats with ungodly persons. The scriptures use the phrase, "tax collectors and sinners." And yet, these undesirables have come to listen to Jesus. On the other hand, by contrast, we learn that the Pharisees and the scribes – the good religious folks – are the ones doing the grumbling and complaining. They are not happy with the company Jesus keeps.

It is to these good religious folks (and yes, to folks like us) that Jesus told these parables about the invitation to rejoice when the lost are found. For **it's the insiders who are offended by the mercy and inclusive nature of the God** that Jesus was teaching them about. Jesus, therefore, challenges us to consider what it means to be an open and caring community – a very important theme for us here at College Hill – and what boundaries, if any, community has. Biblical commentator Helen Montgomery Debevoise states:

Jesus understands that those on the fringe of the community are integral to what the community in all its fullness should be. Until they return, the community is incomplete. These parables, then, are about a hospitality that seeks to forgive and restore...

**When one in our community goes missing, we are all affected. When one is restored, we are all better off for it. That is how it is in the household of God.**

I have often felt that way when some of our once-regular church attenders become inactive. **What is our role in restoring those who have left back into the life and ministry of this community of faith?** Our Congregational Care ministry focuses on this, of course. Yet ultimately, all of us could probably play a more active role in reaching out to those who have been away.

There's something else of great importance that we learn from these parables. What is often missed about Jesus' ministry, and therefore about the loving and inclusive character of God, is that Jesus *already* valued others as people of value and worth *before* there was any repentance. In other words, **Jesus was not calling people to repentance in order to make them valued and worthy of love, but rather because they**

**were already people that were valued and loved and accepted by God.** But this love is also very challenging, because Jesus was also inviting them (and us) as valued people to become part of the present and future vision of the realm and kin-dom of God in our midst.

Today's parables illustrate that God celebrates the recovery of every person, like a shepherd might celebrate the recovery of a lost sheep, or a woman the recovery of a lost coin. God's nature is love, and this love looks like one who goes out and searches tirelessly until what was lost is now found. For no one is outside of the care and even the reach of God.

**So, when you find yourself in the 'lost' category, I encourage you to allow yourself to be found by God, a God who never stops seeking that which has gone astray. When you find yourself in the 'found' category, I encourage you to join in the celebration of others who are found. In order to join in the celebration, however, we must also share in God's mercy and acceptance of others.**

God is always throwing a party, and we are *all* invited to the celebration. The question remains whether or not we will join in the rejoicing. I hope we will.

Amen.

Resources:

*Feasting on the Word* commentary  
 Richard Donovan, Proper 19C, sermonwriter.com  
 Brian Stoffregen, Exegetical Notes, Proper 19C  
 William Loader, Pentecost 16C  
 R. Alan Culpepper, Lectionary Homiletics