

Finding Wandering Sheep & Lost Coins

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

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September 11, 2022

My mom was a diligent searcher of lost objects. Not so much hers, but those things my dad and us four kids misplaced. After the obligatory, "Where did you have it last?" she, with great patience, often dropped whatever she was doing and helped us look. Yes, she was a great finder! One of the hardest parts of being single and living by oneself is not having anyone else around to help search for what has been 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 primary 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 stop seeking after those who are lost.

When we're honest with ourselves, at one level or another, are we not all lost at times and in need of being found? We often hear about our efforts in "searching for God." However, as we shall see, these parables turn that on its head. **It is God, the Divine, the Sacred Presence in our midst that is beyond, among, and within us, that is relentlessly committed to "searching for us!"** And in these two parables, it is not for those who are already found, but those who recognize that they are lost, and yes, for those that don't.

"Which one of you," Jesus asks, "would not leave the 99 sheep and go after the one that is lost?" Truth be told, why would anyone leave the 99 in possible danger to search for just one that is lost? That's the **ethics of triage**, save as many as you can, the best as you can, knowing some will inevitably be lost, a painful unavoidable truth. Cut the losses and move on. **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 as we always need to remind ourselves, if we aren't particularly shocked by anything, then we have probably missed an element of Jesus' original point. It's not hard to understand, for example, 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. It's about transformation!**

But these parables are more than that. Perhaps the most shocking thing we learn 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, would we together as a community of faith, rejoice with the shepherd or the woman (with God) 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, or unwillingness, 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 those considered to be ungodly persons. The scriptures often use the phrase, "tax collectors and sinners." And yet, it is these "**undesirables**" who have come to listen to and learn from Jesus. **They are the lost, and Jesus' message to them is the Gospel itself – you are sought after, loved, and embraced by God.**

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. Therefore, Jesus challenges us to consider what it means to be an open, caring, and inclusive community – a very important theme for us here at College Hill, and even part of our Mission Statement. Therefore, what boundaries, if any, does our community put in place, perhaps even unconsciously? 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.

In this regard, the pandemic has contributed to this and has had a very disruptive effect. The new norm is down to around 50% or so from pre-Covid church attendance. Ours is often higher than that. And yes, there are those who watch either our live streaming or later on our YouTube channel.

While I don't consider any of those to be "lost", I know many of us truly miss those who are special people in our lives, and in the life and ministry of our community of faith. Therefore, as pastor, I whole-heartedly extend a welcome back invitation into the fold. **For we are "less light" without you.**

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 or 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**, how did God find you and what changed as a result? Also, as we are encouraged, and sometimes challenged, join in the celebration of others who are found. In order to truly join in the celebration, however, we must also share in God's mercy and acceptance of others – all 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. May it be so.

Amen.

Resources:

Jill Duffield, *14th Sunday after Pentecost*, The Presbyterian Outlook, 9-9-2019

Rejoice With Me: SALT's Commentary for Fourteenth Week After Pentecost, 2022

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