

“Lost, Found, and Loving It”

Luke 15: 1-10, by Marshall Ziemann, preached 9-15-2019 at PCOC
The Parable of the Lost Sheep & The Parable of the Lost Coin

We continue in our sermon passages from the gospel of Luke. Today's theme is Lost Things. This seems like a pretty good topic for Jesus, who in this passage is hanging out with the sort of folks whom many would see as lost or hopeless or who have lost their way.

Is there anything that you have lost which you are still looking for? Is there anything missing in your life? Anything you're hoping to find? Have you lost hope in anything? Do you ever wonder if God even cares about it? This morning we are in Luke chapter 15, and we begin in verse 1:

^{15:1} Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “Which one of you, having one hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ 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 was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸ “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’

¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Luke, chapter 15, has been called “The Heart of Luke’s Gospel.” Luke 15 consists of Jesus telling three related parables. In today’s reading, we heard just the first two - about the lost sheep and the lost coin.

That 3rd parable, the Lost Son, (or the Prodigal Son) is the most famous of the three (and perhaps the most famous of All of Jesus’ Parables). It’s the one of these three that is most often talked about and it’s often treated separately. So, for today, we focus on just the first two - the lost sheep and the lost coin. The point of these parables is to see the great joy when something that is lost, is found. Each of these stories is meant to teach us that when God finds us, there is joy, there is life; it’s a really big deal!

Just like the shepherd searches and the woman scours the house, so God is on a Search and Rescue mission for people. That’s just the character and nature of our God - God thinks people are worthy of being found.

Now, if God has found you, if you have found God, then in the story of the one hundred sheep, you would probably consider yourself one of the ninety nine. You’re not lost.

But the ninety nine are the ones who get abandoned, or left behind by the shepherd. Stopping to think about it, this actually seems a little risky. Did you hear what verse 4 said,

⁴“Which one of you...[if you lose a sheep] does not leave the ninety nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” (Other versions of the Bible put it: “Leave the ninety nine in the open country...”)

So, really, we wouldn't do it like this. We wouldn't risk the safety of the ninety nine. We would be more likely to cut our losses and stand guard over the ninety nine and hope the one makes it back.

This is called the ethics of triage - save as many as you can, knowing that some will inevitably be lost. You can't risk the ninety nine for the sake of the one. To us, this is a painful, unavoidable truth.

But apparently, friends, God does not work this way, and this is important. In this story, meant to teach the character of God - that lost one means so much, that our Loving Shepherd will not let them go. God will not write them off, no matter how insignificant or unworthy or unredeemable or unsalvageable we may consider them to be.

And here's the other thing - each of us was that lost sheep, and God searched for us that hard. We like to consider ourselves part of the ninety, fine, but we can't forget that before we were in the flock, we were the one outside of it, and God went looking for us.

As I mentioned last week, maybe in your story you are the one who has a definite “Before & After” about meeting God; maybe you have a conversion story that is night and day. I know folks like this. You have no doubt you were once a lost sheep. Or maybe your story is more gradual. You grew up in the flock, and you've always considered yourself a part of it.

At some point, however, even growing up in the flock, there comes a realization, that without this Shepherd, you truly are lost. And in continuing this image of what The Good Shepherd does, you realize now that you do need him -to make you lie down in green pastures, to lead you beside still waters, to restore your soul, to lead you in right paths for his name's sake, and that's why you don't want, or lack, for what you need, because you can truly say, “The Lord Is My Shepherd.

So this story is Good News only to those who recognize themselves as the lost, rather than the well-behaved, secure, contented ninety nine. It's only good news if you know you're lost. That's why the tax collectors and sinners rejoice, while the Pharisees and scribes grumble. They seem to grumble a lot in Luke.

A similar thing happened earlier in Luke, back in chapter 5. Jesus passes by a tax collector's booth (and tax collectors are clearly on “the bad” list). Jesus calls one of them, Matthew Levi, to follow him. The Bible says, “he left everything & followed him” (that's a Before and After Moment).

Then, what does this Matthew Levi do? He throws Jesus a party at his house and invites all his rowdy friends to meet Jesus. And right on cue, again it's The Pharisees and scribes who show up there, complaining to Jesus, "Why do you hang out with these sorts of people?" Jesus gives this famous response, "Those who are well don't need a doctor; just the ones who know they are sick." It's only Good News to those who know they're lost.

That's why we have a Prayer of Confession every week. Yes, we're now part of the ninety nine, but we still struggle with wandering off. We do it all the time. The character of this Good Shepherd, is to continually go and search for us. He won't leave any of us alone. He knows the right paths, the green grass, the cool water, yet still we wander off.

"Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love," is a hymn we sing. And still he goes on a Search & Rescue mission whenever his sheep wander off. So, remember that, the next time you are feeling sad and lonely, when you feel that nobody seems to care. Or whenever you feel like a lost sheep or a lost coin.

Two final thoughts - first, in both stories, it's the shepherd, or cleaning lady, who does all the work. The shepherd seeks, finds, carries, rejoices, calls the neighbors to create a community of joy. The sheep just wander off. Then the woman lights the lamp, sweeps, searches, finds the coin, and creates her community of joy. The coin just falls between the sofa cushions.

Think of all the activity required by these two searchers. They don't give up. It's just part of who they are. It's a picture of how God searches for us, for you. No matter how far we may wander far from God's wisdom and will, Jesus relentlessly seeks us out. "Oh, Love That Will Not Let Me Go" is another old hymn that we sing.

Second, not only does God engage in these Search and Rescue operations, as children of God, we are called to do the same. It is not enough at all to sit on the sidelines, hoping that folks will somehow wander in to our midst. Sure, we feel safe being part of the flock, we feel connected to each other. As children of God, however, we are asked to go out, to reach out, to look out for the lost, the least, to care about bringing others into our group, pastored by our Good Shepherd.

"If God once thought that we were worthy of being found, then our testimony should help someone else to realize the power of God's great love." (Tabitha Ssonko)

"We who know what it is to be lost, sought, found, restored & celebrated – we know something about the possibilities God creates, in our lives. We call it grace. (Matthew Skinner)

Jesus is telling us how happy and joyful God is when we finally are found; when we finally come to our senses and return to God and his ways.

The funny thing about this parable, though, is that Jesus addressed it to the Pharisees, the ones who didn't think that they were lost but actually, they were. The "lost" in this parable are not those outside the synagogue but those inside. "This is the crux of the problem here: the Pharisees and scribes didn't know that they themselves were lost. They could fool people around them, but they could not fool Jesus or God. Jesus uses

this parable as another invitation for the Pharisees to repent and change their ways.”
(Edward Markquart)

Don't you miss this chance, either. The best part of being lost is getting found. And there is great rejoicing every time that happens. Get found! Amen. Let's pray.