

“Lost and Found”

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So, he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a 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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 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. 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. 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? 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. Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

This couplet of parables introduces teachings of Jesus regarding the nature of God, particularly God’s nature to forgive and restore God’s people. The parables repeat throughout what forgiveness is like in terms of things lost and things found. Jesus challenges the hearers to consider what it means to be community and what boundaries, if any, community has.

The crowds are pressing in around Jesus to hear his teachings. All manner of people makes up this community. They gather around Jesus for a variety of reasons: The disciples to receive instructions; The Pharisees and Sadducees to keep tabs on Jesus’ radical teachings; and the people who do not really belong anywhere because they have lived so much of life on the fringes. They are described as the tax collectors and sinners, which means that they are the people no one else wants to hang around with, for fear that the reprehensible reputations of the one would implicate the good reputation of the other. Somehow these outsiders have crowded into the community as well.

This was a group of strange bedfellows, hardly a dinner list that anyone of any reputation would put together. Here they are eating with Jesus. The side conversations start immediately. The whispering starts, “Who invited them? Why would Jesus embrace this woman or this man? Does he not know who they are, what they do for a living? Who is this Jesus? He talks of Godly things on the one hand, and yet he eats with them on the other.”

In Luke 9 Jesus instructs his disciples about what it means to be a disciple. Seventy of them are sent on a special mission, carrying with them no belongings. They go “like lambs into the midst of wolves” (10:3), but return with joy, because even the demons are subject to them. Repeatedly throughout this section, Jesus speaks about money and its dangers, about the demand for repentance, about the costliness of following Jesus. Frequently Jesus eats with Pharisees and with scribes, and on one occasion he confronts the guest and the host with their need for humility and hospitality, especially with regard to the marginalized and weak people of the town. On one occasion Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners.

Now, Jesus’ association with the tax collectors and sinners offends the Pharisees and scribes, especially since the sinners are “hearing” Jesus. “Hearing” for Luke is a sign of repentance and conversion. The Pharisees and the scribes do not take kindly to the possible repentance of those who lie outside their definition of the redeemable. So, the Pharisees and scribes “grumble.

Here in Chapter 15, in response to the persistent complaints of the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus tells two stories that serve to critique the inhospitable character of the Jews.

The first story begins with the query, “Which one of you, having a 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?” What about the ninety-nine left in the wilderness, we ask? Were they left unattended? Nothing is said about their care. The narrative of the story focuses solely on the lone sheep and the shepherd, who goes after the lost one until it is found, and who lays it on his shoulders and comes home rejoicing and calling in his neighbors for a party to celebrate the one who was lost and now is found.

A lost sheep that is able to bleat out in distress often will not do so, out of fear. Instead, it will curl up and lie down in the wild brush, hiding from predators. It is so fearful in its seclusion that it cannot help in its own

rescue. The sheep is immobilized, so the shepherd must bear its full weight to bring it home. Many of the flocks were communal flocks, belonging to several individuals, so there would be two or three shepherds in charge. Those who's flock were safe would arrive home on time and bring news that one shepherd was still out hunting for a lost sheep. The whole village would be on the watch, and when they saw the shepherd coming with the sheep on his shoulders, the whole community would shout with joy and thanksgiving. The second story depicts a woman who, having lost one of her treasured silver coins, lights a lamp and sweeps her house carefully until she finds the lost coin. She is overjoyed and calls her friends to celebrate the finding of her lost coin. No doubt her coin was a drachma, worth the price of a sheep or one-fifth the price of an ox. The coin was worth more than a day's wages in Palestine. It would not be difficult to lose a coin in a Palestine peasant's House and it might take a long search to find it. The houses were very dark, and the floor was beaten earth covered with dried reeds or rushes. The woman swept the floor in the hope that she might see the coin glint or hear it tinkle as it moved. No other parable in the New Testament presents a woman as a metaphor or allegory for God. This would shock and surprise the audience, since God is depicted as a searching woman, who rejoices at finding her lost coin. Jesus shared with the Pharisees and scribes a common attitude toward the tax collectors and sinners, namely that the tax collectors and sinners were lost. However, these parables point out a sharp difference between Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes, with regard to God's searching out and finding the lost. The point of the stories is twofold, emphasizing the compassionate concern of a searching God and heavens glad delight over discovery, when one sinner, either tax collector or Pharisee, comes to faith.

In fact, the themes of joy and celebration are paramount in both stories. Each story ends with a statement that there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. Neither a sheep nor a coin can repent. The issue of the two parables, therefore, is not to call sinners to repentance, but to invite the righteous to join the celebration. "Whether one will join the celebration is all important, because it reveals whether one's relationship are based on Merit or Mercy. Those who find God's mercy offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents. Thus, they exclude themselves from God's Grace. The Pharisees and the scribes put themselves outside the circle of divine grace by the way in which they grumble at Jesus' fellowship with tax collectors and sinners. There is no joy or celebration, no partying or delight, among the Pharisees and scribes. Even though invited to the reception given on behalf of the joyous shepherd / woman, they cannot bring themselves to come; thereby, they are exposed.

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. The parables are about a hospitality that seeks to forgive and restore. These parables call the community to open its doors and rejoice. Sinners and tax collectors gather at the table with the Christ? Rejoice! Laugh! Be glad! They have returned home and now sit in the presence of God. The sheep who wandered off from the rest of the flock, lost in the thicket, is now safe and sound! Hallelujah! Worry no more! The coin that fell through the cracks was easily forgotten but is blessedly retrieved. We can feast! Hope is restored!

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.

PRAYER:

Good shepherd, seek me out, and bring me again to your fold.

To all nations grant unity, peace, and agreement, and to all people give dignity, food, and shelter.

Smile upon me with your favor, that I may dwell in your house

All the days of my life, and praise your name forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

God is like the shepherd who values each sheep in the flock, like the woman who accounts for every silver coin in the purse. God treasures every child of the family. When one goes missing, God goes into search mode. God's nature is love, and love looks like one who goes out tirelessly searching, because the one who is lost is so lost that she cannot find her way back home.

[A]. The Pharisees gave to people who did not keep the “Law” a general classification. They called them “The people of the land”; and there was a complete barrier between the Pharisees and the people of the land. The Pharisaic regulations laid it down, “When a man is one of the People of the land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him a custodian of charitable funds, do not accompany him on a journey.” A Pharisee was forbidden to be a guest of any such man or have him as a guest. He was even forbidden, so far as it was possible, to have any business dealings with him.

[B]. It may have been a matter of sheer necessity. It was only one coin, but these people lived always on the edge and very little stood between them and hunger. The woman may have searched with intensity because if she did not find the coin the family would not eat. Or there may have been a more romantic reason. The mark of a married woman was a head-dress made of ten silver coins linked together by a silver chain. For years the woman would scrape to save her ten coins, for the head-dress was almost equivalent of a wedding ring. It may be that it was one of these coins that the woman lost, and so she searched for it as any woman would search if she lost her marriage ring.