**March 24, 2019**

**Luke 15:1-32**

Read Luke 15:1-3, 8-10

Jesus had been preaching and teaching around town, being his normally disruptive self. He healed a man on the Sabbath. He told officials and dignified people not to sit in honorable places at a banquet. He told the large crowds that they would have to make sacrifices to be his disciples. These things were received with curiosity by society’s outcasts; the sinners and tax collectors came closer to hear more from Jesus. But the Pharisees and scribes grumbled and said, “This *Jesus* fellow associates with the unrighteous and defiles himself in the process.” To which Jesus responded with 3 stories commonly referred to as “the lost” parables.

The story about the woman seems straightforward. A woman had 10 silver coins. One coin was lost. That money mattered to her. She had plans for it. She didn’t just let it go and hope to find it *some*day. She stopped what she was doing to find it right then. She turned on the lights, cleaned the house, and rejoiced when she found it. She even called her friends and neighbors together to celebrate her finding. The woman did not blame the coin for going missing; she took responsibility for the problem, stating that she had lost this precious item. She was just glad to have it back where it belonged: safe and sound in its rightful home.

The woman’s experience is one that we have all reenacted – with keys or our wallet or homework or an earring or something else precious to us. There is an initial moment of panic and grief at what was lost, then a turn-the-house (or office or car)-upside-down search for that missing thing. When the item is spotted, we shout a euphoric, “I FOUND IT!” We do a little happy dance. We feel relief flooding through our body and a sense that all is well. We can relax.

Just so, Jesus said, “there is joy in heaven when one sinner repents.” Perhaps you think this is to be expected. Of course the angels are glad to bring one more member into the family! Of course God is glad to bring one more member from the sinful team to the repentant! But wonder for a moment, if perhaps God is not *just* glad to have one more person among the righteous – wonder if God rejoices because God reclaimed something – some**one** – who was God’s to begin with?! Perhaps God remembers when the sinner wasn’t known by that label – “the sinner” or “the lost” – but was known as Meg or Adam. Perhaps God remembers when the sinner was safe and sound in their rightful home – in God’s hands. Perhaps God takes ownership over the losing of the sinful, which is why God goes to such lengths to send Jesus Christ – God’s own son – to turn the house upside down looking for the lost.

*Choir sings verse 1 “A Woman and a Coin”*

Read Luke 15:3-7

Maybe if you had $10 and lost $1 bill, you would look for that $1 because it’s the difference in a slice of pizza or a whole pizza. Maybe you really need that $1 because you didn’t start out with too many dollars in the first place. But which one of us, if we had $99 and lost $1 would leave the $99 unattended in search of *one* missing dollar?

Jesus asked the Pharisees, “which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does *not* leave the 99 in the wilderness to look for the one that was lost?” He asked this question rhetorically, as if everyone’s answer would obviously be to do the same. “Which one of you *wouldn’t*…?” Perhaps the Pharisees were all dual-income earners with secondary sheep-herding jobs on the side, but my guess is that the Pharisees weren’t too interested in shepherding. My guess is that they, like most modern Americans, would hear the question and shuffle into awkward silence. That they, like we, might be glad to have 99 sheep and be willing to overlook the loss of one measly sheep. Leaving the 99 unattended seems like a much bigger risk to the flock and the owner. It may be better to cut our losses and keep what we’ve got.

Not so, for Jesus. His shepherd left the 99 to find the one sheep. When the shepherd found the sheep he laid it on his shoulders and called his friends together, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” The shepherd took ownership over the situation as the woman did; no blame was placed on the sheep. If Jesus was the good shepherd, again we see God rejoice because God reclaimed something – some**one** – who was God’s to begin with.

This wasn’t the first time the Pharisees heard God’s shepherding message. Jews knew the 23rd Psalm’s promises to be led into green pastures and down righteous paths. They knew the psalmist’s plea in Psalm 119 to come after the lost sheep who strayed, asking God to do what Jesus retold in this parable. They remembered Isaiah’s words of God gathering his lambs in his arms[[1]](#footnote-1) … but that kind of care, that kind of grace is hard to believe. So Jesus said it again. God loves the lost. God does not forget the lost. The Good Shepherd goes out of his way to recover even one sheep who has gone astray. Then God will rejoice at the one who has come home.

**All sing verse 2**

Read Luke 15:3, 11-32

These three stories are marketed under the banner of “The Lost:” the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son. But they would be more accurately marketed as “The Joyful Hunter.” The items lost (or the beings that wandered away) are not the ones deserving our attention. We should have eyes only for the good shepherd, the dedicated woman, the loving father. Each of these three hunters REJOICES when the lost thing returned home. Each of these three REJOICES to the point of calling friends and neighbors over to celebrate. God, the joyful hunter, REJOICES in finding us and returning us safely home. Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, will go to great lengths – even death on a cross – that we might have life.

The nineteenth and twentieth century Christian piety movements made Christianity a personal walk with God. We were taught and sang in hymns like “Just As I Am” that we needed to get ourselves right with God. But that is not the scriptural witness presented here.

As Henri Nouwen wrote in his book about this one parable, “The question is not ‘How am I to find God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be found by God.’ The question is not ‘How am I to know God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be known by God?’ And finally, the question is not ‘how am I to love God?’ but ‘How am I to let myself be loved by God?’ … In all three of these parables the emphasis is on God’s initiative… It might sound strange, but God wants to find [us] as much as, if not more than, [we] want to find God.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

This changes our approach to God’s throne from one of shame or embarrassment or awkward “I don’t know if I belong here” to one of privilege and belonging and joy. Wouldn’t it be good to increase God’s joy by letting God carry us home with heaven’s angels? Wouldn’t it be delightful to give God an “I found it” smile and an excuse to celebrate with heavenly neighbors? In doing so, our self-image shifts from the struggling, forgotten, dis-abled and rejected ones gathering crumbs at the edge of the table, to those who were always rightfully part of God’s kingdom family. We are in the presence of God because God wants us to be here. We have a place at the Table because Christ invited us here before our beginning. We are in God’s loving hands because God turns the house upside down for us each day. We are at home with our family because Jesus Christ has brought us from death to life.

Our journey through life is long and wandering, but God is with us. God seeks us with patience and possessiveness. God calls us his own, going over hill and dale to find us. And, when found, God welcomes us home with joy and celebration. “Look what I’ve found! You’ve come home!” May we all find ourselves at home *here* in God’s house at Sweet Hollow, and at home in God’s arms. Amen.

**All sing verse 3**

Silent Reflection

**All sing verse 4**

1. Isaiah 40:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Nouwen, Henri. The Return of the Prodigal Son. Image Books; Doubleday: New York, .1992. pg 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)