

Lost and Found

Luke 15:1-10

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost/*15th September 2019*

When I was a student at Princeton Seminary, one evening I was frantically searching for my college ring. My dorm room wasn't that big, and I didn't have that much stuff in it. Still, I couldn't find my ring. It was valuable to me. It wasn't cheap. I was going through everything, pulling out the dresser drawers, and all my clothes. It was nowhere to be found. The door to the room was open. It was almost always open. It was then, in a moment of considerable frustration, that my friend Eunsik Cho silently appeared in the doorway. Cho lived next door to me on the fourth floor of Alexander Hall. Born and raised in South Korea, Cho was a quiet soul, and his English was pretty good (certainly better than my Korean). Today he's a pastor in Seoul. Cho and his wife came to visit me here in Baltimore several years ago, which was a real joy. Back on that evening in Princeton, Cho stood there in the doorway. Silent. Watching me as I searched for the ring. Then he slowly approached me, forced me to stop, pointed at me, looked me in the eyes and gently said, "The way you search for that ring is the way God searches for you."

Soon after that encounter, I found the ring. I think of Cho and that evening on Fourth Alex and the valuable lesson I learned whenever I read these parables of loss.

A shepherd searches for a lost sheep. A woman searches for a silver coin. Jesus's intent for these parables appears pretty straightforward. The shepherd and the woman serve as metaphors for the way God searches for us, because God values us, and eventually finds us, and then returns, even carries us back to the place where we belong. It's an uplifting thought, comforting. We can all relate to this message, no matter our age. You can see why these parables are so well known and loved. Lifted out of the flow of chapter 15, the two parables can almost stand on their own.

Almost.

In the world of Scripture, especially the gospels, we have to proceed with caution, lest we miss the forest for the trees. If we put the parables back into the flow of Luke's Gospel, they're even more powerful and remarkable and show the reason why God chooses to be in the world and relate to the likes of us.

Leading up to Luke 15, in the previous chapter we find Jesus teaching about hospitality and humility, we have the parable of the great dinner in which wealthy guests refuse an invitation to dinner and come up with all kinds of lame excuses why they can't go, so the host tells his servant, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner" (Luke 14:31-32). This is followed by Jesus's demanding words on the cost of discipleship, the cost of following him, his challenging teaching on the call to hate mother and father, and give up possessions. The last verse of chapter 14 reads, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Lk.14:35).

Then in the next verse, the beginning of chapter 15, Luke tells us, "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him" (Lk. 15:1). Someone was listening. Someone had

ears. Someone was paying attention. Folks were following him. Folks were coming near to him—coming near to listen to him, folks who were open to what he had to say, who were not quick to reject or refuse or question him. And who were these folk? Tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors. Those doing the bidding of the Roman Empire play with “dirty” money. And sinners. Not the righteous, not the respectable, but the questionable, the wayward. Not only are these people following him in order to hear him, he’s actually eating with them, breaking bread with them, which according to the religious customs of the day, was deeply upsetting and disturbing—immoral!

We often think of Jesus hanging with the wrong crowd, of going to the wrong crowd. But what if it was the other way around, what if it was the wrong crowd that was following him because he wasn’t writing them off, because he wasn’t ignoring them, rejecting them, judging them, condemning them. They follow, they’re eager to listen to him, they’re open to what he has to say because what he’s teaching, what he’s offering them, the world he’s imagining, the life he’s calling them toward speaks to them—because it’s actually for *them*, not the righteous, not the respectable. They know, the wrong crowd, knows that Jesus was born for them. *They’re* the reason Jesus was born, as we hear in Luke. “To you is born this day”—to you shepherds and sinners and all those who live at the edge or at the bottom, to all those who have been excluded, who’ve been told that you don’t count—“to *you* is born this day a Savior” (Lk. 2:11). *They’re* the reason for the season. Late in Luke’s Gospel we find Jesus making this very clear, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). This is the steady current that runs through Luke: Jesus has come to extend God’s welcome to the sinners, to the outcast, the marginalized, the poor, the lost, the forsaken, the missing, to offer them a place at his table.

And the religious authorities, the Pharisees and scribes, will have none of it. They’re grumbling. The Greek here is “murmuring.” It’s the same word used in the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures used to describe the Israelites in the wilderness, grumbling, murmuring against Moses and God because they were stuck in the Godforsaken wilderness (see Exodus 16). They’re complaining. And the chief complaint of the religious authorities was that Jesus was welcoming sinners—of all people!—and then, even worse, having a meal with them. “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Lk. 15:2).

Let that sink in.

That was their complaint.

Just imagine. What if the chief complaint made about the Church today was, “They welcome sinners and eat with them.”

To drive the point home, Jesus gives them not one, not two, but three parables on welcoming the lost and forsaken. We have the parable of the sheep, and the coin, which tees us up for the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). These are parables about the relentless desire of God to pursue us, to love us, to be with us, not because we are especially good or righteous, but precisely because we are sin-bound and lost and we’ve lost our way and can’t make it home without help. As Jesus says in Matthew’s version of the parable, “It is your Father’s will that no one be lost” (Mt. 18:14).

God will not stop until God finds us. Look at the parable of the lost sheep. It's natural to confuse this parable with Jesus' statements in John about being a good shepherd (John 10:1-18). But in Luke, we're not told he's a shepherd. It's assumed. We're told that a man had 100 sheep. Because of the number it's probably true this shepherd didn't actually own all these sheep. He was probably taking care of sheep that belonged to several families. Keeping count was crucial because he didn't own them. If he lost one, then he would have to answer to the larger family or a family of owners.¹ He had to keep track. So, yes, this man goes searching for the lost sheep, which could be a way of seeing how God searches for us if we're lost. But the question is, how did the shepherd lose track of the sheep in the first place? This is where the God metaphor breaks down in the parable. All metaphors breakdown in the end. If God is the shepherd who goes searching, God might have done a better job keeping track of the sheep. Maybe God does lose track of us from time to time, but in the end—and *this is what matters most*—God notices that we've gone missing and will drop everything to search for us—because God can't bear to be God without us.

And returning a lost sheep back to the fold is not easy. Lost sheep often sit down in the field, refuse to move, and begin to bleat incessantly.² The only way to bring one back is to lift it up in your arms or throw it over your shoulders and carry it back around your neck. Consider the strength and determination required to rescue one sheep. The point is this: every sheep counts. Every one matters. No one is expendable. There is no limit to which a shepherd—a good, skilled shepherd—will go to rescue a wayward sheep.

Then, when the lost sheep returns home, there's rejoicing, there's celebration, there's joy. The shepherd invites his friends to rejoice with him. And this, too, must not be overlooked because friendship and fellowship, being together, being close is the point of the parable, it's a theme running through the text, from Jesus being judged for eating with sinners to the celebration over a lost sheep, or a party over a lost treasure, or the feast the father offers the prodigal (Luke 15:27-32). This theme is more evident in the Greek. Eating together, rejoicing together, is a sign of the kingdom. God doesn't want to be apart from us. That's why table fellowship is central to the life of the church—this theme is all over Luke's Gospel.

And so is the centrality of *joy*.

Look at the parable of the lost coin, which shares a similar structure with the parable of the lost sheep. A woman with modest wealth has lost a drachma, a silver coin. It's interesting to know that one drachma was the price of a sheep (1/5th the price of an ox). She needs that coin. She is desperate to find it. She could wait until morning when there's be plenty of light. Instead, what does she do? She lights a light—and that's not insignificant. Light costs money. Lamp oil is precious, even if your lamp was small (and they usually were). She could have waited until morning and saved the money. But she had to expend light and money in order to find what was missing. With costly light she can sweep and search for the coin. And what does she do when she finds it? Like the shepherd, she calls her neighbors and friends together and says, "Rejoice with me."

Last [week](#) we explored the connection between love and attention, love and seeing. I shared the insight of Kathleen Raine (1908-2003) who said, “Unless you see a thing in the light of love, you do not see a thing at all.”³ It’s love that notices who is missing at the table. It’s love that sees the invisible ones, the marginalized, the ones who, without love remain invisible, unseen; the ones who don’t know that they belong at the table, who don’t know that they deserve to know the joy of their Lord. It’s love that goes searching for us down every hole, behind every stone, around every obstacle, who searches and sifts and sorts and leaves nothing unturned in order to see, to find the object of its love, the object, or, better, the *subject* of its desire, the *subject* of great worth: you and me, sinners who often lose our way.

Rejoice with me, the sheep have been found.

Rejoice with me, the coin has been found.

Rejoice with me, Jesus says to the religious authorities.

Why can’t you rejoice with me?

Why can’t you rejoice that sinners and outcasts

and the suffering poor and the marginalized are hearing a good word spoken to them,

and are changing their hearts and minds and following me,

finding hope because they’ve come to know that God is for them?

Why can’t you rejoice for them? With them?

Why can’t you rejoice with me,

rejoice with them and gather at table with us and celebrate the finding of what once was lost?

Why can’t you share in the joy of heaven and sing with the angels?

Why do you want to stand in the way of heaven’s joy?

Why are you trying to steal away their joy? Why are you trying to steal away my joy?

These questions are being directed right at us, the church. Jesus invites us to rejoice with him.

Come, friends, let us share in the joy of the Lord.

May this be our work.

And may we stand guilty of the complaint, “They welcome sinners and eat with them.”

That’s a pretty good definition of the church. Isn’t it?

“They welcome sinners and eat with them.”

May it be so.

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 370.

² Malina and Rohrbaugh, 370.

³ Cited in John O’Donohue, [Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom](#) (HarperCollins, 1989), 65.