

Life-giving Lessons: The Joy of Finding (and Being Found)
Luke 15:1-10 (NIV)
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The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins ^[a] and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

PRAY

I'm sure that all of you have had this experience of loss, so I'm going to do something different today and ask you to supply some illustrations from your own lives. (Two individuals share about losing a child in at the fair; etc.)

How many of you have ever lost something precious to you? Something of value, something difficult if not impossible to replace?

What did you lose? How did you feel when you lost it?

Did you find it? How did you feel when you found it?

This is a common human experience.

Colleen Dyckman lost her wedding ring. She'd taken it off while preparing dinner, and did not realize until the next day that it was missing. Not only was it missing, she feared that it had gotten tossed into the garbage can.

The kitchen trash had been emptied into the large container which was at that moment, sitting by the curb in front of her house. Empty. The garbage had just been picked up.

Colleen ran down the truck and explained to the driver, Edward Wiggins, what had happened. He had six tons of garbage in his truck. Ed pulled over, parked and climbed in, beginning a search. Colleen was despairing that she would ever see her ring again.

Well into the fourth hour of searching, Ed miraculously found the ring! There was great rejoicing! Even more so, when Ed told her later that in 40 years on the job, he'd only successfully recovered three lost items. (ABC news 11.16.16)

Before we consider these two parables about the joy of finding (and being found), we need to pay attention to the opening verses of Chapter 15.

Who is present? To whom is Jesus telling these stories?

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Two groups of people.

The “outsiders” — “tax collectors and sinners” —

and the “insiders” — “Pharisees and teachers of the law”.

The second group—the good synagogue going folks—considered themselves the “righteous”. That group considered the first group/tax collectors and sinners” as “unrighteous” or lost.

Luke tells us that the “tax collectors and sinners” were eager to gather close to Jesus to listen to what he had to say. “The Pharisees and teachers of the law” are disdainful toward them; totally disgusted that Jesus would hang out with them, let alone, that he would sit at table with them! That was socially unacceptable—an outrage! How dare he do that!

That said, keep in mind that the Pharisees were generally respected by the people at large. As for “sinners”, Paul advises the church in Corinth: “¹¹ But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister^[a] but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.” 1 Cor. 5:11

They are the ancient [equivalent to] drug pushers, insider traders, arms dealers and especially, collaborators with Rome. And yes, Jesus eats with them, that’s part of his genius, that Jesus recognizes that they are part of the community and he goes out to get them. (Amy Jill Levine, p 36-37, Short Stories by Jesus)

Before we go any further, ask yourself this:

With which of these two groups do you and I, identify?

We best be careful how we answer. Do you and I identify as good church/synagogue going folks who are ‘righteous’, who know the Lord, and if so, do we consider ourselves “insiders” and anyone else “outsiders”? Or do you and I identify with the ‘tax collectors and sinners’ who want to be close to Jesus?

Are we in the “lost” group or the “found” group? Something to think about!

Jesus begins with a rhetorical question:

Which person among you, having a hundred sheep and losing one out of them ...will not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the lost one until he finds it? (15:4)

This is a person of substance for it was not common for one to have such a large flock of sheep under private ownership. Consider this: How difficult or easy would it be to notice that one sheep missing out of one hundred? If one had a smaller flock of a dozen or so, missing one would be much more obvious. One out of a hundred is easy to overlook. Furthermore, given the size of this flock, the loss of one is inconsequential. Reason would dictate that the Shepherd should cut his losses, count his blessings, and go on his way. No so! As soon as the shepherd notices the loss, he springs into action, diligently searching in order to find it. He's a good shepherd!

He is so concerned about the lost one, that he not only leaves, but leaves behind the others. (One hopes that he has helpers to watch over the 99!) The missing one out of one hundred...that one, the lost one, becomes the object of his search.

He searches in "the wilderness", which in the opinion of some would be a lost cause, but *in Luke's gospel "wilderness" signifies a place of divine rescue (3:2, 4:1, 15:4). The language of this passage repeats or echoes the language of Ezekiel 34:4,6 which describes God's search and rescue operation in Israel. God's sheep "were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them". Israel's leaders abandoned the search, but God declares, "I myself will search for my sheep and look for them....I will search for the lost and bring back the strays" (Ezekiel 34:11,16). The emphasis in both Luke and Ezekiel 34 falls on God's radical resolve not simply to undertake the search, but to complete it—to find the lost (v4). (JR Edwards, p. 434-35)*

One sheep is in danger and the shepherd, risking his own safety, is intent on bringing it back safely.

Eureka! The lost is found!!

A little research on the word "eureka" found that its definition is not merely a city on the northern coast of California, but more to our point—an exclamation; a cry of joy or satisfaction when one finds or discovers something.

A word exclaimed when someone discovers something, from an ancient Greek word meaning 'I have found it'.

(Reportedly, according to my recollection of California state history, this is what was uttered by the individual who discovered gold back in 1849, precipitating the California gold rush!)

(Say it with me: Eureka! Didn't know you already knew some Greek, did you?!)

The owner, having found the lost sheep, carries it back on his shoulders, rejoicing! This is cause for celebration! Without this one, the flock was incomplete; now the flock is whole! The sheep is restored to its proper place. Such joy in the finding and return, is joy so great that it must be shared. So a party follows!

The second parable is about a woman who has lost a coin. Who among us has not done the same? The coin in this case, was valued at the equivalent of a day's wage. That would be worth finding. However, I learned that it was customary in first century Palestine to give a bride, a gift of ten silver coins fashioned into a headband of sorts. This may have been the source of the lost coin. If so, it may have represented one tenth of the woman's savings. As a wedding gift, it might well have sentimental value attached to it also.

Once she realizes the coin is missing, she exerts significant effort in order to find it: lighting a lamp, sweeping the floor, searching carefully, looking high and low. One thing about searching...it takes time. Perhaps, a lot of time.

How many of us—having lost something of value--have retraced our steps, returned to places where we thought we may have left it, or phoned to ask if anyone found what we are looking for? It requires time. Is it time wasted?

During grade school, one of our sons was frequently "losing" things. He was always asking: "Where's my backpack? Where's my homework? Where's my library book? Where's my lunchbox?, etc." Honestly I think he was just lazy. Finally we told him these things were his responsibility and if Rob or I got involved and found the item, he would owe us a finder's fee! I think that broke him of the habit!

"EUREKA!"

When the woman finds the coin, she is elated! Her joy and excitement cannot be contained; such joy must be shared! Friends and neighbors are invited to celebrate with her!

What do these two parables have in common?

What can we learn from these stories about God, and about ourselves?

What is the nature of lost-ness? Do we enter into the joy of the finder?

In each story, there is something of value that is lost, and the one who values it. Each person searches relentlessly in order to find and recover their valuable. The result? Exuberant joy and celebration!

Sheep and coins are incapable of repenting—which in this instance means returning to their owner. Repentance is not primarily about being sorry for our wandering ways, as much as it is actually turning around, reversing course. We turn away from our self-centered ways and toward God, returning, if you will, to our Creator, and following in God's ways.

But the primary focus of both of these stories is not as much on what is lost, as on the Finder—both the Shepherd and the Woman—who represent God. God is portrayed as one who values us. Yes, even one sheep. Even you. Even me. And God is not content until each one of us are safe in the fold. If you are lost...or if you are found...know that God values you, treasures you, loves you and is willing to risk even his own life for you (and me).

Lostness can take several forms: We can lose direction; lose our way; lose hope or faith; lose perspective; lose touch; lose heart.

The important thing to know is that God is always taking the initiative to find us and help us find ourselves in the process!

Furthermore, the JOY in heaven over even one—even you, even me—we when we return/repent—is even greater and more exuberant than we can imagine!

When hearing this parable, a boy in a confirmation class declared:

“What a dumb woman! She spent more on the party than the coin was worth!”

Exactly! That is precisely the point of both parables: God is a fool for love.

That is to say that God loves us; whatever the nature of our lostness...

whether or not we are aware of it,

whether or not we deserve it (we don't), or

whether or not we return that love (some do, some don't).

The God of the Bible is so crazy in love with you and with me,

that God will spare nothing to find the lost; and once found, God and all heaven's angels celebrate with reckless abandon!

The joy of God has no price tag! (J.R. Edwards, p. 437)

And that dear friend—whether you are lost, or found—that is Good News!

Let us pray...