

17th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

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 people 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.'

At yesterday's Men's Breakfast, many of us lamented that one of the most frustrating experiences is that of losing something. Every one of us have lost things.

Sometimes, we lose things that inconvenience us. That last pair of reading glasses gets lost in the sofa cushions. The cell phone that 10 years ago was easily findable as it was as large as a shoebox, now is so small that it gets lost every other day. The important utility bill gets lost in the ever-growing mountain of unopened mail on the kitchen counter. The important letter that was meant to go to area code 11964 accidentally gets sent to 11965. We all know the inconvenience of losing such items.

But for many of us, we have lost things that do far more than inconvenience us. The son or daughter is lost to cancer. The job is lost to declining profits and a struggling economy. The marriage is lost due to growing apart as a couple. The parent is lost to old age. This weekend, on the fifteenth anniversary of the terrible events of September 11th, we remember the loved ones lost in a senseless act of violent terrorism. Sometimes, losing things is more than mere inconvenience. Sometimes, losing something or, even worse, *someone* leaves us feeling as though we have lost a part of our very selves.

But other times, we are not the ones who have lost things. Sometimes, we ourselves are the very ones who are lost. Who among us does not know the feeling of being lost along the journey of life? Who among us does not know the bleak desert of lost-ness that is a sobering reality of being human? Countless hymns talk about being lost and being found; the most famous, of course, being "Amazing Grace." I once was lost but now I'm found...

The fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel is all about "lost" things. Today's lectionary passage gives us the first two of three parables Jesus tells to the people gathered around him. The first is a story about a lost sheep. The second is a story about a lost coin. The third is a story about a lost son.

But before we come to these stories, Luke gives us a few verses of context. As usual, the Pharisees and the scribes are grumbling amongst themselves because Jesus is hanging out, eating even, with what they would consider “undesirables.” You know the kind, tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, lepers, mentally disabled folks - all the people we love to get as far away from us as possible. Jesus is hanging out with them and the church insiders don’t like it. They, in their opinion, are not worth “looking for.” They are not worth “being found.” The church insiders think it best that “those people” remain lost.

Jesus, however, disagrees.

Jesus begins with a rhetorical and absurd question. Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one, does not leave the ninety-nine to find the one? Common sense would dictate that the shepherd would cut his losses and go home with a 99% success rate. After all, wouldn’t it be senseless to leave to find the one wayward sheep only to come back and find the other ninety-nine slain by wolves who just found a defenseless five course meal? It’s absurd. You cut your losses and move on. As the Star Trek character Spock would say, “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

However, this parable - which like all parables speaks of God and the reality of the kingdom of Heaven - would disagree with that particular Vulcan proverb. In the economy of God’s grace, the needs of the few or, in this case, the *one* outweigh the needs of the many. Simply put, the man in this parable does not “cut his losses” and go home without the whole flock. He goes and searches and finds and rejoices. After placing the sheep safely back in the flock with the other ninety-nine, he finds his friends and family and throws a huge party to share his joy.

After this parable, we are told that there will be more joy in heaven over *one* sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. Now, at least two things are of interest here. First of all, God cares more about the *one* sinner than he does about the 99 righteous people who need no repentance. Secondly, we all know that there is no such thing as a truly righteous person who is in no need of repentance (with the notable exception of Jesus Christ). Therefore, I prefer the suggested translation by Father Peter DeSanctis who said that it should read rather as such: “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine *self-righteous* people who *think* they need no repentance.”

The second parable continues much like the first. Something is lost but there are two notable differences. First of all, the person who has lost something is a woman. It is very typical of Luke’s Gospel to include women in the stories of Jesus and the parables of Jesus in ways that the other gospels do not. Here we have a metaphor of God using feminine imagery. The second difference is that this story has a lost coin, not a lost sheep.

Like we mentioned before, there are few things as frustrating as losing those things we always manage to lose no matter how hard we try to keep them found. You know, items like reading glasses, the TV remote, the pair of scissors that is supposed to never leave the kitchen but always does, that second flip flop that always goes missing right before going to the beach, and I’m sure you can provide examples for many more!

This time a coin is lost. The woman searches high and low. She sweeps the house looking for it. We can presume that the timing of this search is in the night because she has to light a lamp to aid her search. After an extended search, she finds her lost coin.

Now most of us, having found that lost item - be it a coin, a pair of glasses, or the TV remote - would allow ourselves a brief moment of joy at finding the item. That joy might be expressed in number

of ways. You might sigh a great sigh of relief. You may clap your hands together and go "thank God!" You may do a little happy dance. But, for most of us, our joy at finding that object would be rather short-lived. We would rejoice for a minute or two and then go about our business - especially if it was only to find that coin or that ferry token that had been misplaced.

However, this woman's joy at finding her lost coin goes beyond the expected to the absolute absurd.

Imagine this scenario: you are lying comfortably in your bed, perfectly asleep around 11:00 P.M. in the evening. The phone rings and you groggily reach for it, clumsily knocking over that glass of water and the box of tissues on your bedside table. After cursing underneath your breath, you turn on the lamp and your eyes adjust to the light. Then you pick up the phone and mumble "hello?" On the other end of the phone is your next-door neighbor who is screaming with joy. Eventually, she calms down enough to tell you that she found the coin that she lost that afternoon and she wants you to get out of your bed and come to her house to celebrate with her and her lost coin. What is your response?

If you're anything like me, you would probably laugh at the absurdity of it, then your laughter would give way to annoyance at being woken up over such a stupid thing, and then hang up and go back to sleep.

But that wouldn't make sense in today's parable. What makes sense in the context of today's parable is that a celebration *must* happen. The joy of finding what has been lost is not something that should be experienced only by the person who found it. Rather, the joy of finding what has been lost is something for the *whole community* to share together. All three of the parables in the fifteenth chapter of Luke end the exact same way. Upon finding the lost sheep, the lost coin, *and* the lost son, all three parables end with the *entire community* rejoicing together!

Now, I realize, as your pastor, that today might not be the easiest day to speak of rejoicing. On the 15th anniversary of the unspeakable horrors of September 11th, we, as a nation, mourn the loss of many people. We mourn not the loss of a sheep or a coin, but the loss of an unfathomable amount of sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, friends and coworkers. We mourn the loss not of a sheep that willingly strayed, but of men and women who were lost simply because they showed up to work that day or bravely sacrificed their life to save others.

How can we speak of rejoicing on a day like this?

Well, here it is helpful for us to be reminded that these parables of Jesus give us a foretaste of the coming Kingdom. Yes, many people were lost to us that day; but they were not lost to God. We remember, with joy and thanksgiving, that nothing can separate us from the relentless love of God - not even death, not even a horrific terrorist attack. No terrorist can claim dominion over our lives because our lives, in life *and* in death, belong to God.

And so, we rejoice. We rejoice even amid the grayness of today's history. We rejoice because to *not* do so would give our enemies victory. The best thing we can do as Christians is to remember that God is in the business of finding that which has been lost. And so should we.

Since we worship a God who is like a shepherd who searches for the lost sheep, since we worship a God who is like a woman sweeping her house for a lost coin, since we worship a God who gladly welcomes home a wayward son, so should we look for one another.

Let us together honor the victims of September 11th by telling a story of them being found. Let us tell a story of us all being found! Let us tell a story, on this 15th anniversary, of a God of love instead of a nation of vengeance. Let us tell a story of a lost sheep and imagine ourselves as the ones in need of being found instead of trying to convince ourselves that we've never left the flock. Let us come together, as a church, as a nation, as a worldly community, and rejoice because love - that love that searches until all have been found - will have the final word.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.