

Sermon for Trinity 3 – Luke 15:1-10

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus].” When Luke introduces the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, he locates these stories in a particular setting. He records that tax collectors and sinners, who were according to 1st century Jewish thought losers and outcasts, these were coming to Jesus to hear Him. The Pharisees and scribes, who according to the same thought were the winners and social elite—they grumbled extensively about Christ’s consorting with losers. “This man welcomes sinner and outcasts,” they murmur, “and even eats with them!” Luke completes his introduction by saying, “So Jesus told them this parable.” In other words, this parable is presented with the full intent of rubbing the salt of lost-ness on the sensibilities of winners who are drowning in the sweetness of their own syrupy success. Jesus saves losers and only losers. He raises the dead and only the dead. He rejoices in the last, the least, and the little over all the winners in the world.

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the 99 in the open country and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?” Christ begins by proposing to His audience of Pharisees and scribes a hypothetical case. Suppose, He suggests to them, a man has 100 sheep and he loses one of them. The Lord asks, expecting an affirmative answer, “Won’t the man leave the 99 in the desert and go and seek the lost?”

Pause for a minute. This parable can hardly be interpreted as a helpful hint for running a successful sheep-ranching business. The most likely result of going off in pursuit of one lost sheep will only be 99 more lost sheep! The successful shepherd would not venture out, but instead cut his losses and stay with the 99. Yet not so with Jesus. Paradoxically, even if all 100 sheep should be lost, it will not be a problem for the bizarrely Good Shepherd. Why? Because He is first and foremost in the business of finding the lost, not making a messianic buck off the un-strayed. Give him a world with a hundred out of every hundred souls lost—give Him, in other words, the world full of losers (which is the only real world we live in, in case you hadn’t noticed!)—and He will do just fine: lost-ness is exactly His cup of tea. (And incidentally, the 99 righteous persons who need no repentance whom Jesus speaks of later in this parable are strictly a rhetorical device: in fact, there are not and never have been any such righteous people anywhere!) He saves the lost and the lost only.

But Christ is not finished at this point. He enters into the record the parable of the lost coin. “... What woman, having 10 silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?” Again, this is not a good lesson in home economics. Back in 1st century Judea, 1 silver coin was equivalent to 1 day’s wage. So this woman who is the keeper of a household income drops the other 9 coins in order to find the lost one. A shrewd and miserly woman would have cut her losses and kept a close eye on the 9 silver coins—after all, this is

90% of her family's net worth. But, like the shepherd, this woman drops everything to hunt energetically for her lost property. One lost coin? She'll find it. 5 lost coins? Even better! She'll find them. All 10 coins lost? Perfect! She's in the business of finding her lost coins. It is her sole intent.

You see the point, don't you? Jesus came to save the lost, and the lost only. He came to raise the dead and the dead only. And lost and dead is even who we are, no? Our sins are evident, even as we are much like the Pharisees and scribes: flaunting our own success and goodness while we look down on others. God says in Psalm 101: "Whoso privily slandereth his neighbor, him will I cut off: him that hath an high look and a proud heart will not I suffer." When we revel in his neighbor's misfortune and sin, God cuts us off. When we highly regard ourselves, turn up our noses, and have pride in our heart against others, God will not endure us. When God cuts us off, when He will not endure us, we are lost! We are dead in our sins! We have no power of ourselves to save ourselves. We have no power to convince anyone else that we are worth saving. It is in this recognition that our whole life is finally and forever out of our hands. If we ever live again, our life will be entirely the gift of some gracious other.

... And that Gracious Other is God. Look back to the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The entire cause of the recovery operation in both stories is the shepherd's, or the woman's, determination to find the lost. Neither the lost sheep nor the lost coin does a blessed thing except hang around in lost-ness. On the strength of these parables, therefore, it is precisely our sins, and not our goodnesses, that most commend us to the grace of God. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

A lost sheep is, for all practical purposes, a dead sheep. A lost coin is likewise a dead asset. Parables about God's determination to move before we do—in short, make our lost-ness and death the tickets we need to the Supper of Christ's Body and Blood. In these parables, it is precisely the lost (and thus the dead) who come to the party; in neither parable is any of the unlost (and thus the living) in on the festivities. At the same time, neither our lost-ness, nor our deadness is in itself redemptive; God alone gives life, and He give it freely and fully! Only the gracious, saving determination of the shepherd and the woman, both stand-ins for God, raise the dead. "The Lord doth build up Jerusalem: He gathereth together the outcasts of Israel." The angels in heaven and God Himself rejoice only over we lost and dead ones who repent!

When God forgives us, He disposes of our whole dead life and raises us up with a new life. He drops all of our sins into the black hole of Jesus' death. He forgets our sin in the darkness of the empty tomb. He remembers our iniquities no more in the oblivion of Jesus' expiration. He finds us in the desert of death, and in the power of Jesus' resurrection, He puts us on His shoulders rejoicing and brings us home. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✨BJF✨