

14 Pentecost Luke 15:1-10
Christ and Grace September 15, 2019
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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? Nobody. No one does this. No one would ever do that. It's insanity. If you lose 1% of your holdings, you don't risk losing the 99% of your holdings to get back 1%. By leaving the ninety-nine sheep, the shepherd would risk them roaming off, being stolen, or being killed and eaten by a wolf. No one leaves the ninety-nine.

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.' Nobody. No one does this. You don't call friends and neighbors together for a celebration only to spend more money feeding and entertaining them than what you found was worth. I mean why bother looking for the coin at all, if you're just going to spend more money anyway?

It's insanity. Nobody does this. Except God.

Jesus explains that God leaves the ninety-nine to search for the lost. God sweeps the house and then throws a party when the lost are found. It's totally and thoroughly insane. And, that's why the Gospel is such Good News.

And what if, when we read this parable, instead of seeing ourselves as the Pharisees and scribes, or as the good Episcopalians sitting in church on this fine morning, what if instead, we see ourselves as the sheep or as the coin? The sheep wandering far from the fold of God, or the coin that slipped out of a pocket and into the dark crunchiness under the sofa cushions? Just like sheep, or coins, we too are prone to wander and find ourselves lost. In fact, often we don't even know that we are lost.

Jesus told this story to a group of highly religious people who fancied themselves as the ninety-nine sheep, or as the nine coins that were never lost. The scribes and Pharisees were not impressed by a God who spent all his time going after the sinner, when God should be spending his time with the well-behaved ones. And so they were scandalized to hear that Jesus was implying that *they* were the sheep and the coins! Even more scandalous, even blasphemous to them, was that Jesus described God as a shepherd or a poor, old woman, both of whom were considered unclean and undesirable. How comfortable are we imagining God as a scruffy shepherd or a poor, old woman?

The tax collectors and sinners already knew they were lost and they came near to listen to Jesus, who was willing to be in relationship with them just as they were. Meanwhile, the Pharisees and scribes had no idea they were lost and stood around grumbling that Jesus would have anything to do with *those* people. So Jesus told them a parable, turning upside down all their preconceived notions of who was lost and who was found.

What have we lost that we do not even realize we have lost? Perhaps it's the passion we once had to make a difference in the world. Maybe we have lost the joy we once had for trying something new and challenging. I think we can all too easily lose interest and energy in the well being of our church when our time is lost in the busyness of our schedules, or we lose hope in our nation when it seems like we cannot make a difference when people would rather argue than agree on anything anymore.

And when have we found ourselves lost lately? There are so many ways in which to actually be lost. Perhaps we think we know the way to solve a problem, only to find ourselves sheepishly admitting we have been wandering far too long searching for the answer as we finally seek a shepherd for some guidance. We can be lost in depression, anxiety, or worry. We can find ourselves lost at school when we don't understand something and are too embarrassed to ask for help, which just gets us farther behind and more lost. Heading off to college can sometimes make us feel like lost sheep, so today our youth put together care packages to send to our freshmen, to remind them that they are not lost to us or to God.

When life throws us curve balls we wrestle with our faith and can feel spiritually lost, or we become lost when we turn down a wrong road of behavior that takes us far away from our true self. September is Recovery Month and our adult forum speaker, Omri Morris, spoke well to that this morning as she shared her story with us. Even those lost in addiction are not lost to God, the Great Recoverer.

And sometimes we intentionally choose to be lost, to hide from God. I saw a cartoon just this week that showed a grumpy, scowling sheep hiding behind a rock. The caption read, "Some sheep don't want to be found." Sheep can be stubborn and intent on going their own way, not realizing that the shepherd knows what is best for them. Whether we see ourselves as sheep or coins, we will all find ourselves lost from time to time, needing to turn around, to change direction. The Greek word used for repent is *metanoia* which implies a sense of turning, changing, starting over. And when we repent scripture assures us that there is joy in heaven, joy in the presence of the angels of God.

Now, neither sheep nor coins can repent, but then, this is a parable, and Jesus is not really talking about sheep or coins, but about us! Yes, repentance is important but in this parable Jesus is not only calling sinners to repent, but also is calling the righteous to join the celebration. Those who find God's mercy to be offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when the lost are found; cannot even bring themselves to go out and look for the lost. And in their stubbornness they exclude *themselves* from God's grace and they miss the celebration.

The Good News is that our God is a God who is always seeking us, whether we know we are lost or not. Our God will always find us, because the celebration does not happen until the lost are found, and God is waiting to throw a party for us all.

Amen.