

“Lost and Found and Lost Again”

Luke 15:1-10

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In a couple of weeks, Flora and I will be spending a few days in Minnesota reclaiming some of our possessions from a self-storage facility. When we moved to Costa Rica more than two years ago now, we had not intended to stay more than a couple of years, and so we packed away almost everything in this wonderful climate controlled room until such time as we returned to the States, or as God would have it, until we learned that we would be staying here longer than originally planned. That day has come. In addition to all my books, among the many things I am looking forward to seeing once again, even if Flora is not, is a large stuffed sheep that predates Flora’s arrival in my life, a large stuffed sheep that I have managed for more than fifteen years to save from Flora’s diabolical plans for it to become a little sheep lost in a Minnesota landfill. Baaaah! Like the shepherd in the parable, there will be great rejoicing when I have recovered my little lost sheep. But unlike the shepherd in tonight’s parable, I will probably fail the test of discipleship and stewardship the sheep represents when I simply put it back into cold storage for a while longer instead of giving to someone who can cherish it as much as I do.

To understand more fully my failure where my own sheep is concerned, let us take a look at the sheep about which Jesus is speaking, the infamous

“hundredth” sheep that decided to take a stroll away from the rest of the flock. Along with the parable of the woman and the lost coin, these two parables of the Kingdom have a lot in common with the parable that follows them, the more famous Parable of the Prodigal Son, or, as I prefer to call it, the parable of a Man and his Two Immature Sons. The Lectionary wisely leaves that parable for another day, since its drama and power cast such a large shadow, and allows us to concentrate on these two other parables, even though the more famous one, like the two before us tonight, also has to do with finding what was once lost, and then celebrating.

For the most part, I think we usually read these two parables as if we ourselves were the lost sheep or the lost coin, waiting to be found, or remembering when we were waiting to be found. This may be especially true when we ourselves are feeling a little bit lost or directionless. We imagine, rightly, that God seeks us out, and once we have responded to God’s grace, we return to the fold, or the pocket, and that God rejoices at our homecoming. I have no doubt this is true. Each of us is lost without God, unable to find our way back to the flock on our own, wandering around, often in circles, and in the darkness, hoping desperately that there is someone looking for us. As a child, I found myself in such a situation following a baseball game at Cleveland Stadium, somehow separated from my family for what seemed like an eternity. It was bad enough that my team had lost the game, which is what they always did in those days, but then for me to be lost

on top of that, in an imposing and confusing building, was a truly frightening experience. And when I was finally found, there was indeed much rejoicing among my family and our friends. My lostness distressed them probably more than I was distressed myself. Our lostness may not be physical, but rather spiritual, but I have no doubt that God feels the same way when a lost soul returns to the comfort of the body of Christ as my parents did when I was returned to their waiting arms.

I think we also sometimes read these parables in reverse, as a call for those of us who have already been found to become shepherds to seek out the other lost sheep and lost coins of the world, for there is no one whose return is not coveted by God. We then, like faithful shepherds and house managers, are called to spare no effort to find the least, the last, and the lost. These parables express the great Gospel truth that there is no one beyond the desire of God's love, even if they are not capable, on their own, of recognizing that. The task of discipleship is then to go out and share that message, welcoming home with a great celebration those who are found. This is the great impulse of missionary movements and evangelistic campaigns, to make the whole world aware that God has a place in the kingdom for everyone. We needn't worry quite so much about the ninety-nine safely grazing sheep or the nine silver coins carefully tucked away in a purse, for God has them well in hand. Our call is to be like the shepherd or the woman who are not satisfied with a ten percent, or even a one percent, loss, but who want for the Kingdom of Heaven the fullness of what was entrusted to them on earth.

As valuable as these interpretations are for us, both in our personal relationships with God, and in understanding our call as followers of Christ, let me suggest a third way of thinking about this passage that I hope will deepen it even further. This third way is not unrelated to the first two, but perhaps its twist will help us in understanding this passage in the light of the unavoidable journey of Christ toward Jerusalem, and the of cost of discipleship, the two great and intertwined themes which Luke has been stressing in the chapters preceding our reading this evening. You will remember that since the end of the ninth chapter in Luke, Jesus has been slowly and theologically making his way toward the City of David, toward the cross he will carry, and along the way he has been teaching his followers about discipleship, about the crosses he calls them, and us, to carry. You see, as much as Jesus is teaching the Pharisees about the acceptability of so-called sinners, he is also teaching us about himself, and how we are to imitate him.

That's why I think it is helpful for us to take the romance out of these parables and remember that the little lost sheep, like all the other ninety-nine, was not kept as a pet, but as food. And the coin, as fine a piece of handiwork as it may have been, was not kept as a work of art, but as currency to be spent when the need arose. The value of these lost objects is significant in the lives of their owners, one percent and ten percent respectively, perhaps even the difference between life and death in a tough year on the farm. And thus, the value of these assets makes all the more meaningful the actions of both the shepherd and the woman when, in joy,

they called to their friends and neighbors to celebrate. You see, between the lines of these two parables, even if we are spared the details, is the idea that what is found is then used up in celebration; the sheep is eaten, and the coin is spent. When the shepherd finds the wandering sheep and when the woman finds the misplaced coin, their first reaction is to call to others to share the blessing, not simply to relate the happy news, but truly in celebration, with a party, a feast! And what would be the main course of such a feast?: roast lamb, of course. And what would pay for all the side dishes and the drinks? A piece of silver, of course. And even if what was used wasn't *the* sheep or *the* coin that had been found, it would have been another sheep or another coin, which would really just be the same thing, the giving of a significant gift from an attitude of gratitude.

Ok, so now here is the twist for the day, and why this is important for those of us who are not sheepfarmers and who keep our money in banks rather than underneath the mattress. What I would like you to think about is this: that the sheep we have lost, or the coin we have misplaced is that part of ourselves that makes us whole, that part which allows us to live freely and fully, as God intended for us to live. It is the part of us that keeps us from being recognized as the image of God we were created to be. It's the part that our pain, our sorrow, and our sin have hidden from our view. It's the part that has been stolen from us by the pain or sorrow or sin of others. Some have lost one percent, some have lost ten percent. Some, like the father in the Parable of the Man and his Immature Sons, have lost

fully one half. Some have lost so much that they can't keep track. The tax collectors and the sinners, the people about whom Jesus is sharing these parables with the Pharisees, had lost virtually everything. And yet in meeting and knowing Jesus Christ, just like us, they regain the lives they had lost, they regain that part of themselves that allowed them to go from barely surviving to genuinely thriving. And the question we hope they asked, like one of those characters in the movies who wakes up after years in a coma, is "What am I going to do with the life I have been given?" How will I share the gift of my life? With whom will I celebrate?

I said before that these parables were a bit of self-revelation about Christ, and an invitation to our reflection on imitating him. That is because the question, "What am I going to do with the life I have been given?" was never more faithfully answered than by Christ himself who fully used the life, the gift from God, he had received. His life fully his own, with all its parts in place, he called his friends and neighbors to a celebration that consisted of him giving away the very thing he had received. Jesus did not hoard his life for himself, like the foolish man who built bigger barns to hold his surplus. He did not bury it in the ground in fear of the master like the servant did with the talents he had been given. He did not fail to return to give thanks for it like the nine of the ten lepers who were cleansed. Instead, Jesus, in celebration for the life he had received, offered himself fully for others even unto death on a cross. Yes, he roasted the found sheep, and he spent

the recovered coin, and he didn't do it just for himself, but for his friends and neighbors, and for us.

I'm tempted to say that we have the choice to do nothing with the life we receive in Christ, but I'm not sure how true that really is. I mean, is it really possible for us to be in relationship with Jesus Christ, to have returned to us that which was missing from our lives, and not respond in gratitude with a celebration that involves us giving ourselves away for others? Is it possible to live in the Spirit and not lead Spirit-filled lives? Is there such a thing as containable joy? Of course, the truth is that no matter how aware we are of the gift of our lives in Christ, we'll never quite be able to give our lives away as fully as Christ did. But that shouldn't stop us from giving away more and more, celebrating more and more, and living more and more. For when we give away the life we have received, we receive even more life to give away. That's the promise contained in Jesus' words that "Those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Friends, as we share a meal together tonight, perhaps our table conversations could center on that question that arises when we realize that we have had restored to us the lost sheep or the lost coin that is the part of us we always knew we lacked, that important and everyday question: "What will I do with the life I have been given?" May God help us to live our answers faithfully. Amen.