

Third Sunday after Trinity: Luke 15:1–10

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Have you ever lost something of great value to you? A dog or cat that ran away. Perhaps you lost your cell phone or the keys to the car. Have you ever lost a child, as Mary and Joseph lost Jesus for three days in Jerusalem? How did you feel when you turned and your child wasn't there? What ran through your mind? You were frantic. You searched and searched and wouldn't rest until you found your lost child. You'll stop at nothing until you find what was lost. That's the seeking heart of the shepherd and the woman in today's Gospel. It's the heart of the Lord telling the parable. He is the seeking shepherd, the searching woman, the God who is totally focused on seeking and finding the lost.

Have you ever been lost? As a child, were you ever separated from your parent, even for a brief moment or two at the grocery store, or at the mall, or while hiking on a trail? Your family turned left, but you went right. What was it like to be lost? How did that feel? What did you think? You didn't know which way to turn so maybe you just walked in aimless circles. Or simply sat down and cried. To be lost is to be isolated, alone, helpless. You don't know north from south, east from west, and it wouldn't matter if you did. You have no idea where you are or how to get home. To be lost is to be dead. A lost sheep and a lost coin are, for all intents and purposes, dead. Dead to their owner, dead to the world, dead even to themselves. That's us lost in Sin and Death.

As Jesus tells the parable, the "lost" are the Gentiles, the "tax collectors and sinners" who were flocking to Jesus. Jesus welcomed them and ate with them. He came to seek and to save the lost provide directions for the way home. And naturally, there is joy and a party when the lost are found, and the religious wanted nothing to do with it because those were "sinners." The wrong breed of lost. Religious riff-raff. The unclean.

The ninety-nine righteous sheep and the nine coins safely in the purse were religious Israel, with Jesus' parabolic tongue firmly planted in cheek, embodied by the scribes and Pharisees. It's not that they needed no repentance; they did. But they didn't think they did, which is why, though they imagined themselves safe and secure in the Israelite country club, they were as

lost as the “sinners” they sneered at. You don’t rejoice in being found until you realize you’re lost.

The parable is outrageous, even to our ears, when you think about it. Who among you having a hundred sheep and losing one, doesn’t leave the ninety-nine to fend for themselves and go off and search for the lost one? Answer: No one does that! You can almost hear the shepherds in the crowd saying to each other, “That carpenter-rabbi from Nazareth doesn’t know bupkis about shepherding! You don’t abandon ninety-nine to save one. You write off that lost sheep off as a dead asset and cut your losses.”

Or what woman with ten silver coins who loses one, doesn’t spend the whole day turning the house upside down to find that one lost coin? And again, there are more than a few raised eyebrows and scratched heads saying, “Well, maybe for an hour or two, but there comes a time when you forget about it and get on with the daily chores. Maybe it will show up one day, but there’s no point wasting good time chasing after a lost coin, right?”

But the kingdom of God doesn’t operate by our priority systems, much less our approach to lostness. God’s ways are not our ways; His thoughts not our thoughts, His seeking strategy not the same as ours. To be clear, these parables are not about shepherding, pastoring, or financial management. They’re about God’s amazingly outrageous grace that seeks and saves the lost without regard for the cost or the religious logic. He searches for hopelessly misplaced and the chronically lost. He seeks those who don’t wish to be found. He values the dead asset more than living ones. He dies for sinners not saints, for His enemies not his friends.

To be lost is to be helpless. The lost sheep can’t do anything to be found. It can make a lot of noise, which it probably does, but that will also alert the wolves. Not good. A lost sheep is as good as a dead sheep. It can go off in one direction or another, hoping that it will bump into the flock or the shepherd, but in all likelihood, its wandering will only increase its lostness. In fact, the best advice given to those who are lost is stay still. Stay where you are. You’re easier to find, than if you are moving all over the place. And the predators can’t find you quite so easily when you’re still. To be lost is a “be still and know that I am God” moment.

The lost coin is an even better example of lostness. It can’t make a sound nor can it move around. It can only sit there in its lostness between the cushions of the couch waiting to be found. That’s much closer to our condition of being spiritually dead. We’re as spiritually immobile as a lost coin; and as spiritually vulnerable as a lost sheep.

God finds us in our lostness. If you remember being lost, do you remember being found? That moment you were reunited with Mom or Dad or whomever found you, and how the whole world changed in an instant? You were found! O happy day!

The shepherd seeks his lost sheep. The woman turns the whole house upside down, turns over the rugs, digs between the pillows of the sofa, literally goes through the house from top to bottom seeking that one lost coin. The lost are the sole object of attention. Nothing else matters. The nine coins in the purse, the ninety-nine sheep in the flock, are taken for granted. It's the lost that commands all the energy and all the attention of the seeker.

You and I have been found in your lostness. And when we are found and recognize it, there is rejoicing. A free ride on the shepherd's shoulders as though you were some kind of hero. A party that costs much more than the day's wages you are worth. That's the joy of the kingdom of God, the joy of finding the lost. That's the joy of Jesus, who saw the joy of your salvation and endured the cross, scorning its shame. That's the joy of even one sinner who repents, one prodigal who returns to the father's house. That's the joy of the merciful heart of God who rejoices in finding you in the lostness of Sin and Death and bringing you to your home on the shoulders of your Savior.

As Jesus tells the parable, the lost sheep represents the Gentiles, the outsiders whom the Israelite elite resented. But the parable goes deeper than that. The wayward sheep is Adam, the wayward priest of creation who brought Sin and Death to our humanity. He is the lost coin, the dead asset in God's bank account, who cowers in shame behind fig leaves in the bush as God seeks him, "Adam, Adam, come out, come out wherever you are. Adam where are you?" Adam is lost in Sin and Death, lost in a spiritual darkness from which he could not find a way out. He is us in our Sin and Death. We are all the lost children of God. We reached where we shouldn't have. We grabbed for gifts not given to us. God went the way of Life; we chose the way of Death, and we got lost.

You sense the lostness of humanity all around you. You feel it deep inside yourself too. You see people trying desperately to have something called a "life," whether in career or in self-improvement or in acquisition and gain. Yet they come up empty. You see it in our addictions, our attempts to quiet the noise of thoughts and feelings, the endless drumbeat of the conscience accusing and making excuses for ourselves. Even we "religious" people feel it, perhaps more acutely because we know there is something better but we can't seem to find it. We know there is a place called home where our hearts can be at rest, but we can't seem to get

there. And some days, we just sit there like a lost child separated from Mom and Dad, alone in our little worlds that make no sense.

Jesus came to our wilderness, leaving behind the righteous hosts of heaven to seek and save Adam in the lostness of His death. He came as the second Adam, taking on our flesh, wandering in our wilderness, suffering our temptation, dying our death. He met us in our lostness. He found us. He found Adam. He found our true humanity, what we were intended to be and what we are in Him. He found us in Death and He raised us to life and seated us with Him in His glory where the angels rejoice in the return of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, lost humanity. The celebrate and sing praises to the Lamb who was slain but lives who by His blood redeemed a fallen and lost humanity for God.

He found us. He found us before we ever knew we were lost. He sought us before we ever sought to find Him. He's been there all along for us, the Mystery hidden in all creation, the Word who in the fulness of time became Flesh to dwell in bodily humanity with us. He sought us when we sought Him not. He found us when we did not want to be found. He bore us up on His shoulders, took us to His cross, and brought us through Death to Life. And the angels rejoiced and marveled and wondered at such amazing and outrageous grace that seeks and saves the lost.

You and I gathered here together are a visible sign of that amazing seeking and finding grace in Jesus. We have been found in Him. Baptized into Him. Living in Him and He in us. Dining at His table. Singing His praises. Sharing in His salvation joy. And every time another sinner returns to his Father's home and joins us in the celebration, we get to share in Jesus' joy. Every time a child of Adam is baptized, every time a lost sheep comes home to the fold, every time a lost coin is returned to the coffer, every time the eyes of faith are opened to the seeking, saving, restoring love of Jesus, there is joy. And you and I are privileged to share in that joy.

I'm sure sure if the ninety-nine sheep could talk, they might have a thing or two to say about that black sheep on their shepherd's shoulders, getting a free ride home and a party. Who knows? One of them might have been on the menu for the BBQ! I'm sure the nine coins, if they could talk, might give a sideways glances to that wayward coin that avoided being spent by hiding. We often give that same religious look to our fellow sinners who dare to take a place at Jesus' table of grace. "What's she doing here? The nerve of him being here."

The pharisees, the religious representatives of Israel, had no need to repent, at least in their own minds. And rather sharing in the outrageous joy of God's seeking, saving, forgiving grace, they grumbled at the unfairness of it all, like the older son in the parable that follows, when his prodigal brother returns home and gets a party thrown in his honor. You don't appreciate the lost being found, until you realize you are as lost as they are. And you are as found in Jesus as they are. The church is God's great "lost and found" of wayward sheep, lost coins, prodigal sons, and sinners of every sort who have come to faith's recognition that they aren't lost after all. They're found in Jesus.

One last thing about being lost: When you're found, you're no longer lost, even if you haven't moved an inch. The moment the coin was in the sight of the woman, it was no longer a lost coin. The moment the shepherd saw the lost sheep, it was no longer lost. The moment the Word of Jesus came to you, the moment the water of Baptism splashed on you, the moment His Body and Blood touched your lips, you are no longer lost but found. Even if you are still in your wilderness. Even though you still go to your death, you are always and ever found in Jesus.

And that's cause for rejoicing.

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Luke 15:1-10 (14 Pentecost 2019, Proper 19C)", posted 2019-09-17 (<https://htlcms.org/2019/09/luke-151-10-14-pentecost-2019-proper-19c/>).