

September 11th, 2022

Luke 15:1-10 “God’s Heart for Humanity”

It’s no big secret that I’m prone to losing things. You’ve all seen it. Marie Henry watched me lose a pencil that she handed to me in choir practice. She handed it to me because we were making corrections in our sheet music and I was supposed to hand it back. There was no interruption in our conversation. No loss of eye contact. It just vanished. She said it was like a magic trick. “Now you see it, now you don’t.” Here’s the weird thing though. As much as I lose things, I have a talent for finding things too. My specialty is finding other people’s missing rings. I’ve found a couple out in grassy fields. I found one on a sandy lake shore. All without the benefit of a metal detector. Cameron lost a ring one time and I found it in our couch even though he was sure he looked for it there already. A couple of years ago, a friend in my gym class lost his wedding ring in the training room. And this is a room that doesn’t have a lot of clutter in it. The whole class, about 8 people, were looking all over this relatively empty floor in a space about the size of our fireside room. The guy narrowed it down to the time, the place, and the exercise we were doing when he last remembered having it on and noticed it was missing. As everyone else was walking around the room searching, I just sat on the floor in that place surveying the area trying to figure out where it might have gone if it flew off his finger, or if it simply slipped off and rolled somewhere. Then I stood up, walked over to one of the rowing machines and saw that the ring had become lodged in a gap in the rubber floor protector on one of its legs. The guy said, “How in the world did you figure out where it was?” Good question. What I’d like to know is, “How in the world can I *not* find a pencil that was just handed to me?”

This week, we’re considering two parables from a series that Jesus told concerning lost things. The lectionary gives us the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, but not the prodigal son which is fine because I’ve preached on that parable plenty of times. These two are less familiar but are still great parables. That is until you really think about

them. That's where you'll run into some big problems that might get you into trouble if you ask too many questions about them in Sunday School. Not that I would know what that's like. You might say, "I don't see any problems with these parables! They're about the joy of finding lost things. 'I once was lost, but now I'm found.' Just like in our opening song this morning." Yes. Wouldn't that be nice? Let me just warn you ahead of time, this sermon is going to focus a lot more on questions than answers. But sometimes that's the best way to learn. Sometimes mulling over questions leads us to find the answers which is appropriate since these parables are all about finding lost things.

Before we get too far into the parables themselves, let's take a look at Jesus' audience. As we've seen over the last two weeks, sometimes the audience is just as important as the parable. This week Jesus is addressing tax collectors and sinners along with some scribes and Pharisees who are grumbling because Jesus hangs out with tax collectors and sinners. And when I say, "sinners" I'm not talking "yes, we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory" sinners. All of us fit into that category. The people in this passage are actual disreputable people who are recognized in their communities as "unlawful sinners." Also remember that this takes place right after Jesus shared a bunch of parables about how we need to treat sinners as if they were family. In fact, he says in God's Kingdom and at God's table, these tax collectors and sinners *are* family. Apparently, these grumbling scribes and Pharisees took offense to this, especially when Jesus insisted on practicing what he preached - in public in front of everybody.

Grumbling is a national pastime in any time or place in history isn't it? It's universal. We grumble about our national leaders, that is unless the leader is "one of ours" and then we grumble about the opposition. We grumble about younger generations. I get a kick out of people from my generation -- Generation X, when we complain about Millennials and Generation Z. We say, "They don't know the value of a dollar earned. They don't want to work. They have too much time on their hands and play too many video games. They act so entitled." You know what the

Builder Generation was saying about Gen X when we were kids? The exact same thing! Art Ross in his commentary on this passage writes, “Grumbling is a reminder of sin. For sin occurs when God's children are not in harmony with creation and with their Creator.” But notice how Jesus is dealing with these grumblers. He’s not just writing them off or simply condemning them. He’s not “un-friending them” or “canceling” them like we do today. He’s not tweeting his “moral outrage” on Twitter. He’s *actually engaged* with them. He’s taking the time to share stories that his audience will likely relate to. He wants to move these scribes and Pharisees from grumbling to rejoicing. That’s his educational objective.

Now let’s pick these parables apart starting with the parable of the lost sheep. “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.’” Okay. But whose fault is it that the sheep is lost? I mean really ... who is this on? Whose problem is it? If you’re a sheep herder, are you going to put the blame on the sheep? No, this is on you. You are the responsible party. The sheep has no agency. The sheep is just a passive object in this story. We’d *like* to blame it on the sheep. We’d like to say, “Well, this sheep is lost because it made poor life choices, so it’s clearly to blame. Just leave it to fend for itself and go take care of the ninety-nine. They’re the ones that matter because they chose to stay with the flock. If the lost sheep dies, then I guess that’s just what happens.” But that’s not the reality! It’s the shepherd who lost the sheep, and it’s the shepherd that has to do the work to find the sheep. Also, is it really wise to leave the 99 other sheep unprotected? Is that good stewardship on the shepherd’s part? Sometimes this story is represented in paintings and illustrations as a shepherd coming back into the flock with a lamb on his shoulders. But how many paintings or illustrations have you seen where Jesus is walking away from the flock to find the missing sheep? And all the

sheep have this, “Wait a minute, where’s he going?” look on their faces. Here’s something else to think about. Jesus says that when the sheep herder goes back home he invites his friends over to celebrate and rejoice over finding this lost sheep. Celebrations usually involve food. Especially when you invite people over to your house. What do you think is going to be the main course at a celebration that’s hosted by a sheep herder? Pita bread and hummus? Stuffed grape leaves and olives? These are the kinds of questions that got me in trouble in Sunday School when I was a kid.

The parable of the lost coin is similar. The silver coin is one of ten; each worth about a day’s wages. Did the missing coin lose itself? Nope. As one who is an authority on losing things, I can confidently say that the missing coin is the woman’s issue not the coin’s. Even more so than the sheep, the coin is just a passive object with no agency or autonomy. Unless you’re in a Disney cartoon where clocks, tableware and furniture often come alive, a coin isn’t going to just get up and walk away. Amy Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament Scholar at Vanderbilt University asked, “What or who is really lost in this parable? Is it the coin, or is it the woman?” Most of the time we lose things because of our own carelessness.

Here's another consideration. The woman in the parable of the lost coin was *not* one of the “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” that Jesus had been referencing for the last three parables. She was not a poor, marginalized outcast. She has 10 drachmas, a house, and has friends and a community. Her concern, like the shepherd, is to find the piece of the whole that was lost. Unlike the shepherd, though, she *does* claim responsibility for losing the coin. And then there’s the rhetorical “Who among you” question that Jesus puts on the table. If you lost a tenth of your savings or one day’s wage, you would certainly search diligently for it. But if you found it, would you *really* call your neighbors to have a party? It seems like the woman might end up spending the coin to celebrate finding the coin. That seems kind of wasteful doesn’t it? Kind of like the sheep herder who would slaughter

a sheep to celebrate finding a lost sheep. This shouldn't surprise us though. The last time we read the story of the prodigal son, I suggested that the parable should be called "the wasteful or prodigal *father*." Again, these are the kinds of questions that don't go over well in Sunday School class. This is when the supply of rice krispy treats start drying up. But these are important questions to ask.

These stories are about the righteous and the sinner. They're about grumbling and rejoicing. Who is the one that needs to be found? It looks like the tax collectors and sinners had already found Jesus. But even though they found him, they're *still* considered outsiders. It seems that the 'righteous' are the ones who need to be found which begs the question, "Is it possible to be righteous yet still need to be found?" In our day and age, here are some questions that we may have to consider - Might the parents who want their children to succeed so much that they wrap their whole lives around baseball games and dance recitals be lost? Might the career minded man or woman who's made moving up the corporate ladder their top priority be lost? Might the folks who work jobs they hate just to give their family things they never had be lost? Might the senior who has a great pension plan but little sense of meaning since retirement be lost? Might the child or youth who works so hard to be perfect and who is willing to do just about anything to fit in be lost? Here's a tough one - Might the earnest Christian who is constantly asking whether people have accepted Jesus into their hearts be lost? That one's a sermon for another day though.

I think God's message to us through these parables is: "You are mine. You have always been mine. You were created in my image and are therefore connected to me. And because you are mine, I will seek you out *wherever* you are and try to bring you back home—because I love you so much!" Can we be open to that kind of amazing love? Can we accept God's heart for humanity? Can we let down our defenses and self-doubts long enough to simply receive it and to be engulfed and swept away by this love? Again, the questions are often as important, if not more important, than the answers.