

Luke 15: 1-10 Errant Sheep and Misplaced Coins

Our passage from Luke this morning contains part of a series of parables, specifically the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. Jesus has been teaching about how he expects his disciples to behave toward others; sometimes as parables, sometimes just as stories. Parables are usually understood as short stories which are metaphors or allegories drawn from familiar situations but used to illustrate a moral or religious lesson. In Matthew's gospel any parable usually begins with the introductory phrase...the kingdom of God is like; what the world would look like if God's reign was fully present. With this introduction we usually then look to assign the various characters in the story a role which gives us information about God and God's relationship to humankind. In some ways this makes the parable a riddle or puzzle which we need to solve. However the parables that Jesus tells are often not easily reduced to an equation where this equal that. Also after thinking upon them for awhile, the meanings almost always have something unexpected—something challenging within them. And they usually work at more than one level—thus there may be more than one meaning present. There are often a whole series of possibilities and experiences that you did not imagine upon first reading. Although in Luke's narrative these particular stories are clearly meant as illustrations about God's desires for us as indicated by the inserted verses referring to heavenly celebrations, the introductory motif is lacking. That doesn't mean that they are not to tell us something about God, just as that motif in Matthew doesn't mean there are no other meanings present as they are told there. The verses beginning the parable of the shepherd who has lost a sheep also appears in Matthew but the audience is quite different. The woman and the lost coin parable is unique to Luke. So we have two ways to discover what Jesus was meaning with these stories. The traditional one which concentrates on the metaphor itself; another is the audience to whom Jesus is speaking. In Matthew, the lost sheep occurs in a conversation with the disciples. Instead in Luke we have Jesus surrounded by a mixed crowd—a crowd of tax collectors and sinners who gathered to hear him and another group of Pharisees and scribes gathered to grumble and complain about the company that Jesus is keeping. It is not what he is teaching which is upsetting the Pharisees, but it is who he spends time with, who he has table fellowship with because sharing meals indicated familiarity, even intimacy that has them grumbling. It is this complaint: "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." which causes Jesus to begin telling these parables speaking directly to those complaining about Jesus' choice of companions. To understand the parables we begin by assigning roles for those who appear in the story. Jesus begins with the question: "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?" This almost sounds like a rhetorical question, a question expecting the answer to be agreement with the premise—as if the answer is obvious that the "you" address would do what the story illustrates. But in this group that Jesus is addressing it seems unlikely that the answer would be affirmative. If we did not identify immediately the shepherd with God, would we not think this was a ridiculous question? Economically in the reality of the world it would not make sense. In this parable the shepherd's whole flock is in the wilderness—together except for the one. In the wilderness, not safe in a pen and being in a wilderness which would mean that they all were endangered as well the lost individual sheep.

The shepherd's presence was their protection from danger. Would it really make sense for a shepherd to leave them there and go after one single individual who has strayed--to risk the entire flock for the sake of one individual sheep. Because we bring to this narrative the image of Israel as that one of ninety-nine whom God has been "going after" since its formation in the wilderness, we view this as exactly how God acts. We know that in this story God is the shepherd. We know that Jesus is not really referring to the Pharisees as being ones likely to "go after" those who have strayed. Despite the fact that the Pharisees represented the religious leaders of the day, our impression of them is one which excludes them being concerned for anyone that strays from their legalistic understanding of the tradition. In this parable the shepherd is the one doing all the work—seeking, finding, carrying, rejoicing, and creating a community of joy to celebrate the finding of the lost. As a response to the grumbling of the Pharisees, it seems obvious that Jesus is again chiding them for their hypocrisy and lack of concern for others, for those tax collectors and sinners standing nearby who have been listening to Jesus speak. To the Pharisees those individuals were outcasts--their lifestyle has put them beyond the bounds of moral society. They certainly wouldn't be "going after" them. So on one level Jesus is reprimanding the Pharisees for not seeking those who are lost and contrasting that to God's actions in going to extremes to find the lost. In this parable, it is possible to view the lost sheep as sinning because it has wandered away from the flock, but how does the sheep repent? How is it different from the remaining ninety nine except who are also in peril? In the second parable, a coin is lost. This parable at first glance makes more sense. If you had only ten coins and had misplaced one, you would definitely carefully search for it adding light and sweeping the area. Finding it would definitely be a cause for rejoicing. But again we have an element in the sequence of events that seems odd. Would finding a single lost coin result in calling together friends and neighbors for a celebration...celebration which could easily cost more than the found coin was worth? Again this parable ends with joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. In this instance, it is hard to image the coin, an inanimate object losing itself. If we assign the role of the seeker to God and that which is lost to God's children what do these parables tell us? They tell us that when it comes to God's children--the lost, confused, hurting children whom God claims--God has no sense as we understand it. God will risk everything to find one of them--one of us--and having found us--the lost and beloved child--will give everything again to celebrate the finding. Being a parent of a child who wanders away--and no matter how carefully you watch--it seems that it will happen at least one in the life of a parent--creates a frantic, desperate need to find that child. The longer that child stays missing--the more extreme the joy and relief when they are found--the greater the need to celebrate. We take great comfort from both these parables as they describe an attribute of God which we depend upon—God's amazing initiative to redeem us through Jesus Christ's life, ministry, death and resurrections. God's seeking us out and going to such an extreme to find and claim us. But we also need to consider the audience to whom these parables was directed—those grumbling, complaining Pharisees. Jesus told these parables to a cluster of ultra-pious Pharisees and straight as an arrow scribes, the supposed moral superstars of the day—those ninety nine righteous of the flock remaining together. These folks grumbled about the fact that Jesus had the nerve to socialize with the likes of "tax collectors and sinners." The temptation in assigning roles is to then equate the Pharisees with

the ninety nine sheep who are not lost and the coin which is still in the purse. It is easy to see the errant sheep and the lost coin as those folks—the tax collectors and the sinners over whom God and the angels rejoice when they are found. Jesus' parable is definitely pointing out to the Pharisees God's view of lost sheep and coins, highlighting their hypocrisy. Yet perhaps there is more here for us to consider than a simple scolding of the "righteous Pharisees. In this parable we are not told how that sheep managed to get separated from the flock, just that it was lost. The sheep which remain together are also in peril because they are in the wilderness. Those ninety nine righteous may not know they are in danger, but that doesn't mean they are safe. Jesus seems to be saying that everybody is a little bit lost and in need of being found. We are familiar with the idea that we are all sinners and in need of forgiveness, but would not place ourselves in the same category as the "tax collectors and those easily identified as being outside the moral precepts of our society." In the passage from the letter to Timothy we read "the saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost". Paul had experienced quite a change—a major reversal of his understanding of the world when he encountered the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus. For most of us our encounters are not so dramatic; the transformation of our lives is not so easily seen. In the same way the differences between the ninety nine and the one may have more to do with self understanding of their situation so the dichotomy is not simple. In these parables it is not clear what the sheep and the coin could have done differently. The how of the "getting lost" is not even part of the parables; the parables are about being found, not getting lost. Those ninety nine righteous may not really have no need to repent; they may just not realize they too are lost. Because in these parables, the errant sheep and the lost coin do nothing to aid their being found. Jesus speaks of the rejoicing over repentance, but the seeking and finding come first. There is no formula about conditions necessary for the seeking to begin. There is only the astounding degree that the lost are sought and a matching extreme celebration over the finding. As shown by the many expressions of gratitude and praise found in the writings of Paul about his encounter and the changes it made in him, there is something that we can do in response to our being found---we can celebrate with joy. We can celebrate with unbelievable joy how it is to be sought, found and loved by the one who goes to such lengths to find all those lost—whether they are aware of how lost they are or not. And we are called to express that joy by the spreading of that good news that we have been given that God is always searching, sweeping, looking for and steadfastly loving those who are lost. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.