

## Lost Sheep, Lost Coins, and God

Pr 19 YrC September 11, 2022 Luke 15:1-10

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The Pharisees are upset because Jesus is hanging around with the wrong kind of people. And before we dismiss their complaint as another example of the Pharisees trying to find fault with Jesus, I think we need to realize something important. The Pharisees are right. Jesus is breaking bread and spending time with people who are well known for their sins.

He is spending time with the liars, the cheats, the shameful people in society. Jesus lets the man who steals sit next to him and talks with the woman with the scandalous past. Jesus knows what they have done, knows their sins, and does not turn them away.

Jesus welcomes the people whose lives are marked by wrong choices, wrong actions, and who the rest of society has declared are the wrong kind of people. Jesus welcomes the rejected and scorned and fallen into his presence and his company. But instead of being shocked and upset about that I think we need to see that for what it really is- an expression of the good news of God.

Because if we have failed in our lives, if we have hurt other people, been wrong in what we have done and said, then Jesus welcomes us to draw close and hear of God's forgiveness. If our sins are well known to everyone or if our sins are known only to God, Jesus welcomes us to draw close and hear of God's grace. And I know that is an easier thing to rationalize in our heads than to believe into our hearts. Which is why Jesus uses parables to help us understand the surprising love of God.

Jesus tells the story of a shepherd who has one hundred sheep and one of them wanders off. And the shepherd searches for the lost sheep. The shepherd doesn't count them and go, "oh well 99/100 is good enough." No, the shepherd immediately leaves the other sheep and goes searching. Which tells us two surprising things.

The first is the deep love that the shepherd has for all of the sheep. All of the sheep are precious and important to the shepherd. So the shepherd is not willing to accept any, not even one percent of them being lost. The shepherd will spend whatever time is necessary and do whatever he has to do to find that lost sheep and bring it home.

And notice the parable doesn't tell us anything about that lost sheep other than it is a sheep of the shepherd and that it is lost. So the shepherd doesn't search for it because it is the smartest, or has the best wool, or is usually well behaved. No, the shepherd cares about the sheep. Period.

And that is the way that God looks at us. God loves us. Period. Doesn't matter what we have done. Doesn't matter what we can do. God loves us and when we are lost God wants us found.

The second thing the shepherd going to look for the lost sheep tells us is that the shepherd trusts the other 99 sheep. Think about that for a moment. The shepherd loves them dearly too so he would not leave them if they are at risk or if they would suffer because the shepherd goes to look for the lost one.

And that is important because God's love and care for those who are lost, who are hurting, who need to be found doesn't detract in any way from how God loves those of us who are found, who are doing okay, who know what to do and how to be in the world.

And in the parable when the shepherd finds the lost sheep he puts it on his shoulders and is filled with joy. So much joy that when he returns with the sheep he goes to all the neighbours and tells them the good news and invites them over to celebrate the return of the lost sheep. And that is another incredible surprise.

I say that because we had a dog once that we loved dearly who was a runner. If he slipped his leash or got out the door he was half way to the next county. And I went after him many a time to keep him out of trouble. And after chasing after him and finding him I was always relieved that he was safe, annoyed that he had gotten out again, and a bit upset that I had to go and find him. But I never, in all those times of chasing him and bringing him home was so happy that I went and knocked on the doors of my neighbours to come over for a party to celebrate his return.

The good news is that God isn't annoyed when we repent, turn back to God, no, God rejoices. God isn't frustrated that we wandered but God celebrates that we have returned. That is how much God loves us, that is how important we are to God, that is how heaven reacts when one of the lost returns. There is joy and

celebration because the family of God grows, becomes richer, and is more complete when those who are missing are found.

The other parable that Jesus tells about God's love is about a woman searching for a lost coin and it is similar to the parable of the lost sheep in many ways. Something precious is missing and there is determination to find the lost, commitment to not stop until it is recovered, and rejoicing when the it is found. And while much of that echoes the parable of the lost sheep, there is also a unique surprise in this story we don't want to overlook.

The woman lights a lamp to help her search for the lost coin. She doesn't wait until morning to begin looking because there nothing is more important to her than finding the lost coin. And, and pay attention to this, the woman isn't concerned about how much it costs to find the lost coin. She spends lamp oil, which wasn't cheap, to search. She is willing to pay any price, even more than the coin is worth, in order to have it back because the coin is priceless to her.

The words and life of Jesus bear witness to the truth that you are important and precious to God and God will do anything and everything to have you know that. Which is why Jesus goes to the cross, suffers and dies so that the path to our salvation can be opened. Jesus does that so we can see and know and believe that there is nothing, nothing in heaven and earth more important to God that us.

And that is true if you have only wandered a bit, or if you have no idea how to get right with God. That is true if you feel a bit of guilt at your past or if you that shame has broken you. Because Jesus rose from the grave so you can know that nothing can stop God from forgiving you, from offering you new life, from bringing you home.

The parable concludes with the joy the woman has when the coin is found. Like the shepherd, the woman's joy is so great that she has to share it, she has to invite others to be a part of it, she has to let that joy fill her world.

God's joy bursts forth when we receive and accept the love of God. God's joy fills us and spills forth for all to see. For God invites us to be part of that joy, part of that love, part of the kingdom of heaven now and always.