

Lost and Found

Luke 15:1-10

As I examined this passage of scripture questions came to mind. Why were the Pharisees and scribes grumbling and so upset that tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus? Was it because Jesus refused to play by their rules? Were they afraid if Jesus accepted sinners, there would not be room for them? Were they just bullies who were mad and wanted everyone else to feel bad too? So let's take a closer look at the passage to discover what it says for our lives.

In our scripture Jesus told parables to crowds of people. Among them were tax collectors and sinners. The grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes that we heard earlier in Luke continued. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." In the face of compromises by temple priests, who were under the thumb of Roman authorities, the Pharisees were concerned about careful adherence to purity laws that played an important role in defining the boundaries of the Jewish community. Jesus was continually engaging in acts of befriending and eating with outcasts – acts that violated the boundaries and threatened the identity of the community, from the Pharisees' point of view.

In responding to the murmurings and grumbings, Jesus told the parable of a shepherd who had one hundred sheep and lost one. He left the ninety-nine in order to go looking for the one that was lost until he found it. Having found it, he "lays it on his shoulders and rejoices," went home, called friends and neighbors together, and invited them to come and rejoice with him. The implication of the opening phrase of the parable is that any good shepherd, including a Pharisee or scribe with such a flock, would do the same.

Then Jesus told another parable with the same meaning; this time of a woman who lost one of her ten silver coins. She was probably a poor woman, living in a very small house with no windows. In order to find a lost coin, she lit a candle, swept the floor, and searched until she found it. Having found it, she, too, called together friends and neighbors, inviting them to rejoice with her. Just as the shepherd and the woman rejoiced over the lost sheep and coin, so, too God rejoices over each sinner who repents.

Given the culture of first-century Palestine, it is worth saying that shepherds were no longer held in high esteem as they had been in the periods when the Hebrews were nomadic people. The shepherd was an established image for God in scripture, but no longer in Israel. During the first century, shepherds were marginalized, included among the forbidden occupations, and excluded, along with tax collectors, from eligibility to serve as a witness. Although there was a long tradition of valuing shepherds, the crowd would not have really thought of God in shepherd terms. How could God be one that went out of his way to protect stinky, dumb sheep that needed protection and constant care? Why would God take the time to go after one foolish, lost sheep that wandered off from the flock? Wasn't it the sheep's fault that it was lost? God has enough sheep that one lost one could easily be replaced.

But even more outrageous, Jesus compared God to a woman! Women in first century Israel were also marginalized. They had little legal protection and were not able to participate fully in all aspects of the religious life of the community. So, how dare Jesus compare God to a shepherd or a woman? And why would God be concerned about a lost sheep or a lost coin, things that have little intrinsic value, and yet the person who represents God seeks persistently until that which was lost was found. These parables suggest something very important about the nature of God. God values all people. Neither the sheep nor the coin did anything to

warrant attention. Each is considered of great value to the one who has lost it, but has, in fact, little intrinsic value in and of themselves. Both the sheep and the coin are passive. They do not do anything to overcome being lost. It is the woman and the shepherd who expend all the effort seeking that which is lost.

It is sometimes interesting to look at a hymn based on scripture. Such is Jaroslav J. Valjda's 1990 hymn "A Woman and a Coin."

A woman and a coin – the coin is lost!
How much it means to her, what time and toil,
What part it was to play in her bright dreams!
Am I that treasured coin worth searching for?
I'm found, and you rejoice! What love! What love!

A shepherd and a sheep – the sheep is lost!
Far from the flock, the one in hundred cries,
Then – risking life – the shepherd's voice and staff!
Am I that treasured sheep worth dying for?
I live, and you rejoice! What love! What love!

A parent and a child – the child is lost!
The parent feeds on memories and hope,
The prodigal on husks and one last chance.
Am I that treasured child worth waiting for?
I'm home, and you rejoice! What love! What love!

Dear God, you sought us when – the world was lost!
You gave Your only Son at what a cost;
Your Spirit welcomes home the tempest-tossed;
Now we can be all You were dreaming of.
We're safe, and you rejoice! What love! What love!

The hymn speaks of welcome, love, grace, compassion, redemption, and how God seeks the lost. Such a vision of God's love lies behind Jesus' parables of the

lost and found. This parable points to God's deepest desire, greatest yearning, and passionate dream for all of God's children and the whole of God's creation.

In *God Has a Dream*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes:

I have a dream, God says. Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family. **Michael B. Curry**

Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:4-10:

⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ^[a]—by grace you have been saved—⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

These parables portray God as seeking out that which is lost, and Jesus explains that he had no other choice than to seek the lost. As children of God and followers of Jesus, it is our job to seeking those who are lost and point them toward Jesus, so they too can have this relationship with the Lord.