



MINISTER
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24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 16, 2007

Luke 15:1-10

The Search

Intro: Our New Testament lesson comes from Luke, it contains two parables of being lost and found. They are the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. These surprising stories of God looking for us come after Jesus has taught about the high costs of discipleship and how hard it will be to truly follow him. The Pharisees are listening and not liking what they hear. Let us listen for God's surprising word.

Our reading this morning gives us a picture of God we don't see often enough. Many times God is described as remote, somewhere up there, and we wonder where God really is. Here Jesus paints an image of God who in very real, common, and even lowly ways comes right here searching to find us. This description of God being connected and concerned and crazy enough about each one of us - enough to come seek us out no matter where we have gone, this idea greatly angered the religious leaders of the day. Yet that is the take home message Jesus would have us hold on to, it doesn't matter how lost we may think we have become, how far we have

wondered off by our own deliberate choice, our own unconscious drifting away, God is on the ground seeking us out still.

The two parables give us rich and wonderful ideas of how God searches for us. One is God as the shepherd who knows something is wrong, and goes out looking. The other is God as the woman who would clean and search until a missing coin is found and returned. The Pharisees hearing this would find the idea of comparing God to a lowly, smelly shepherd who would take such enormous risks, or a woman searching for a single, low value coin, as

preposterous. God was not like that. God was more aloof than that. God kept better company than that, and should not be shamed by being likened to such.

Jesus was talking about being lost and found, that was what faith was all about, and the Pharisees knew it. In the image of the lost sheep – about a lamb carried over the shoulder to safety – the Pharisees would have remembered the Passover. They would have remembered being held in slavery in Egypt. They would have remembered their longing to go back to the slavery they knew instead of the freedom God had in mind.

More importantly, they would have been reminded of the power of being found. To be lost in the ancient world meant to be lost for good. The Semitic words for “lost” and “destroyed” are the same. A person without a home, a tribe, or a god could not survive. A person simply didn't make it on one's own. To be found meant literally to be saved.

When Jesus told them that the shepherd risked everything for the one little lost lamb, they understood the profound implications: when we are lost, God alone seeks us, lifts us up, and carries us to safety – across the Red Sea, across the desert, across whatever wilderness we find we are in. Jesus doesn't have to say it, but if he did he might have said, How can you, in light of all that, condemn me

for eating dinner with a few lost souls?

That might have been enough to set them straight, but Jesus doesn't leave it there. He tells another little story that goes like this. A woman lost a coin. She swept the house looking for it. She found it and invited all her friends and neighbors for a party.

It sounds straightforward, albeit if a little strange, but this story, too, was filled with images that were loaded with experience and meaning. First, lost and found property was a huge issue to the Hebrew people. They had developed an intricate system of laws governing lost property. In Jerusalem there was actually a centralized lost and found system. In the countryside, people relied on the rumor mill of friends and neighbors which acted as a bulletin board of lost things. It was a sort of ancient form of property and casualty insurance for the protection of the entire tribe.

In the matter of lost money, because there would have been no way to know to whom it belonged, if one saw a coin on the ground, one did not pick it up. One left it where it was until the rightful owner found it. It was helpful that coins were not perfectly round and they were concave, like little misshapen dishes, so they were not likely to roll far from where they were dropped. So, for example, in the story Jesus told, the lost

coin in question absolutely had to be in the house – or almost absolutely.

I say “almost absolutely” because there is a hidden drama in the story that everyone hearing it for the first time would have understood. The women of the village would have been in and out of one another’s homes all day long, and because a coin was not likely to have rolled out the door, anyone who had been in the house was a suspect of thievery until the coin was found. And such thievery would have been a violation of religious law and a crime against not one person, but against the entire tribe.

So, those who heard his story would have understood right away that this little lost coin hit the rumor mill in a flash. For two reasons every single woman would have been promptly informed that this coin was gone: reason one was concern for the woman who lost it, but the other reason was self-preservation. We can imagine what might have happened to a thief in that tight community.

When the text says this, “When she had found the coin, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin,’” we know what that party was about. They were celebrating because they were off the hook. As soon as she found that lost

coin, the entire tribe was declared innocent, liberated, set free.

One more thing – Jesus underhandedly hooks his listeners with a pun. The word for coin, zuz, is the same as the word for a person who was cast aside. Jesus tells his pious critics that everyone is culpable until all are found, all of us are held responsible until all are welcomed in, and no one can be truly free until every little lost zuz has its rightful home in the welcoming hand of God.

These stories are not about a sheep or a coin. They are not about a woman or a shepherd. They are about God. They are about us. Jesus irreverently paints a picture of God, the irrational shepherd who abandons an entire flock to seek one poor lamb who gets lost. In the grace of God’s mind, one little lost lamb merits the shepherd’s undivided attention.

Jesus gives us the image of God in the poor woman who has lost her coin, one who has slipped through the cracks due to no fault of its own. In the grace of God’s mind that little zuz merits the whole world’s attention until it is found.

Some of us today feel distant-even lost to God. We don't see how God can still love us after all we've done and all we have failed to do. And yet God is searching for us to bring us home. Some of us have parts of our lives that are lost

to God. They are hidden in the shadow of shame and so we try to hide lest we be discovered. And yet God is searching for us to bring us home.

Some of us have been knocked down by a crisis and we don't know which way is up and we feel lost to ourselves and all of life. And yet Jesus is searching for us to bring us home. And some of us do have a sense of joy about being found by God, lifted up on those shoulders of grace and being carried with great joy and celebration back home.

Wherever you are. Whoever we are. Whatever you have made of your life, Look at the face of God and see there, for you, not a frown or a scowl but the smile of one who searches for you in love. Wherever you are, Jesus taught, God is on the way, shepherd’s crook or broom in hand. However lost you might feel, God has dropped everything and will not rest until you are found . . . and not until all are found can any truly be at home.

Amen.