

## The Parable of the Lost

### Luke 15: 1-10

We continue our journey through Luke, reading parables that, let's be honest, leave us asking more questions than helping us find definitive answers. When it comes to parables, it seems like the first time we read them, we think we get their meaning but then after one or two more readings, we start wondering and thinking about what exactly these parables are trying to say to us.

I have to tell you, it made me feel a lot better when I heard a bible scholar say, it is okay that these parables never make sense the first time we read through them. They aren't supposed to! That's why Jesus tells them. Jesus uses an image of something so familiar so that it stick with the people and then as they continue to grow in faith, as we continue to grow in faith, this image takes on new meaning, takes on new understanding.

In fact, in some of the Gospels, Jesus purposely uses the telling of the parables to hide the true meaning of what he is teaching, going as far as saying to his disciples that the secret of the Kingdom of God has been given to you but to the ones on the outside, everything is in parable so that they will not perceive, so that they will not understand.

What I find ironic about these moments when Jesus teaches in parables, is that Jesus realizes that not only do the “outside” people not understand. But neither do his disciples. So usually Jesus has to go back and explain the meaning of the parable any way. Just look at the introduction of parables in chapter four of the Gospel of Mark. We will see Jesus beginning to teach and then turn around and explain the parables to his disciples.

Parables are not expected to make sense the first time we read them. They are supposed to get us thinking about the Kingdom of God in a new way.

So I figure since we are continuing to read and journey through Luke with these parables, we are in good company. The disciples didn’t understand them the first time through and look at who they were able to become as they continued to grow on their faith journey. We need to realize that it always takes more than one reading of the parables for meaning, even new meaning, to come to light.

So with that in mind, let us approach these two parables in Luke and realize that this time, unlike before with some of the other parables, these parables are more familiar. Today we hear the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin.

As we hear these texts, we can almost imagine, the shepherd searching high and low for that one lost sheep. This image is quickly followed up by a woman

frantic to find a lost coin, scouring the house, tearing things up from top to bottom, all to find that one lost coin.

Great images! And we can relate to both of them. Sure we might not be shepherds but all of us, at one point or another, have had frantic searches for that one thing that is near and dear to us, that one thing that we cannot imagine living without in our lives.

We hear these images and immediately our hearts and minds resonate with the Lost!

But I want to caution us against jumping so soon to our conclusions about who is the lost in these stories. So many times we read these parables and we assume that they are about us. We put ourselves in the place of the Lost and quickly determine how we think these stories should end.

We always assume we are the lost ones that Jesus is frantically searching for because after all...has Jesus met us? We think we are pretty great people. Why wouldn't Jesus want to come and find us? Why wouldn't Jesus want to hang out with us? After all, we throw a pretty mean potluck!

But as I said before, the parables are not designed to give us definite answers. They are designed to get us thinking and wondering about the Kingdom of God. They are designed to expand our understanding of who God is and how we

are called to live out our faith. Parables are designed to not make sense. They are designed to be illogical according to our very logical world.

So for us to read and understand that these two parables are about us does a disservice to them. These parables are not about us. They are for us.

Here's the difference: As much as we love to sing the song "Amazing Grace" around here, we should know the lyrics by now. "I once was lost but now I'm found. Was blind but now I see."

As people of faith, we've already been found. We've already been named and claimed. We've already been told that we are God's Beloved Children.

If we are anyone in these stories, we are the 99 sheep that get left behind while the shepherd goes out searching for the one lost sheep. We are the 9 coins sitting on the dresser while the lady tears up her house looking for that one coin that rolled away.

We are not lost. We are the found. We are sitting in the pews. We have a relationship with God. We connect somehow some way to the larger faith story of God's love and grace.

Sure like all relationships, we have our ups and downs. We wander away. We go searching and seeking. But more often than not, we always find our way home. It may not be to the same church or faith community as before but we

always always find our way back to God's love and grace. God is always there, welcoming us home as one of God's Beloved children, named and claimed, who has been found again.

These parables, the parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin, are about the people beyond our doors, beyond our four walls. These parables are about the people who have not yet experienced God's love or God's grace in the lives. There are any number of reasons for this. Maybe they closed themselves off to such an experience. Or maybe they have been so hurt, so broken in the past that they cannot hear this message. Or maybe this whole belief in God doesn't make sense.

As I said, there are a number of reasons why people have not or cannot open themselves up the grace and love of God. No judgement on this. It is just a point to start the conversation on why these parables are not about us, the ones sitting in the pews. Rather, these parables are for us to remember what it was like the first time we were found.

Here is why I say that. In this text, we are told Jesus has been having table fellowship time with several people. We are also told that Jesus is not only having table fellowship with people. He is having it with "other people". You know, those tax collectors and sinners, the people no one, I mean no one, wanted at their house.

And here we are, hearing that Jesus was not only breaking bread with these people. He was hosting them. He was welcoming them as his guests.

And the religious authorities are not happy. They begin to grumble. And when Jesus doesn't hear or even respond to their parking lot meetings, they begin to grumble louder. So Jesus finally responds to their grumbling. Not as they wanted, you know with a promise to never do it again, but Jesus responds to their grumbling with these parables about lost things.

Now we have to realize that when Jesus tells these stories, both groups are there, listening. Both groups are at the Table. Both groups are there as Jesus' guests, invited and welcome. Both groups, the tax collectors, sinners And the religious authority, are there, as an example of a potential community made whole, if only the found ones would expand their understanding of Table Fellowship.

These parables were not only about the sinners and tax collectors. They were also for the religious authority as an invitation to experience the expansive depth of God's love for them and for others.

And the same holds true for us today. These parables are about the people who are broken, who are hurt, who empty because they have not experienced the healing depth of God's love and grace in their lives. And they are for us, the ones who are found, sitting in the pews. These parables serve as reminders for us to

remember the joy we felt the first time and all the other times, we learned, and rediscovered that we are God's Beloved children. These parables serve as ways for us to realize that just because God goes on a crazy scavenger hunt, searching for the truly lost, the hurt and the hurting, the outsider and the forgotten, just because God goes on a crazy scavenger hunt, searching for the lost ones, doesn't mean that God loves us any less.

God's love is bigger than we could ever imagine. There is more than enough to go around so that when God brings that lost one back, we won't build a fence. We will make the Table larger, adding a seat, adding a plate, adding the cup of new life, getting ready for the larger celebration.

You see, these parables serve as a way for us to enlarge our understanding, to enlarge our experience of the hope that is the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God comes to us in surprising and amazing ways and it never ever is what we expected. It is illogical in our very logical world, like a shepherd leaving 99 perfectly good sheep to go off and find that one lost one, like a woman scouring her house to find one lost coin, and then spending two times as much on a party than that one coin was worth.

With these parables, Jesus reminds us that the Kingdom of God is never ever about us, as individuals. It is always about all of God's children, the found and the

lost alike, coming together as a community, joyful, grace filled and loving one another as God has loved us.

This past week, ESPN shared the story of a football player having lunch with a young boy who was autistic. The headlines about this story unfortunately have read, I think without really meaning, they have read almost condescendingly to the young boy, appearing as if this football player saw this young boy, took pity on him, and then graciously lowered himself to eat with this young boy. Almost as if this young boy should be grateful this star football player noticed him at all.

But this young man has been quick to say it wasn't like that at all. He told reporters that he can remember what it was like in middle school, how the kids teased others and excluded kids, sometimes for no reason at all. This young man simply said, "I can remember what it was like in the middle school cafeteria, sitting on the outside, not sure if anyone liked me. I don't ever want someone to feel that way ever again. So I sat with him and we had a meal together. I never imagined this meal together would get so much attention. I just wanted to let him know I saw him and that I was his friend.

Jesus wasn't telling us these parables to get us to turn back to God. He tells them to us because Jesus wants us, the found ones, wants us to understand that there is more to this welcome, this invitation, this celebration than we originally thought. It is not just that one sheep was returned. It is not just that one coin was

found. The joy and the celebration comes from the fact that the missing piece was found and now the set is complete. These parables are not about our actions. They are about God's.

God knows, that until every single one of God's children is back home, the celebration can't really begin. God knows, that until every single one of God's children is connected and a part of the Kingdom of God, that until all experience the love, experience the grace, experience the peace, experience the joy of being found, then the party can't really begin. God knows that all are welcomed at the Table, then true healing and wholeness cannot happen for all of God's children.

These parables are really about God's joy in making the Body of Christ whole once more. God knows and we know something wonderful, something life-transforming, something amazing. And it is not ours to hoard or to keep only to ourselves. It is for us to share with each and every child of God that is welcomed home, so that we are one step closer to realizing the Kingdom of God here on earth, a kingdom where all are welcome, where all are loved, where all are seen made in the image of God, where all are celebrating and joyful.

I love how Eugene Peterson translates this text in the Message version. Instead of asking the rhetorical question, "Which one of you", like it is translated in the NRSV, Eugene Peterson asks it as a definite answer: "Wouldn't you leave the

ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it?...Won't she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it?" leaving the unasked question for us being, "Wouldn't we celebrate instead of complain when someone, anyone discovers that he or she has been found and they are welcomed to the Table?"

Well, of course we would... because we remember what it was like the first time we were found and embraced as a child of God.

May it always be so.