
Let us to turn to two parables that give us a glimpse of the grace peculiar to God's kingdom. Turn with me to Luke, chapter fifteen, verses one through ten.

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: '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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

This is the word of the Lord.

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One of my New Testament Professors, Clifton Black, used to tell us that preaching on the parables was a tough assignment. The challenge is to wrestle truth from familiarity. We've heard most of them so many times that either we've already got their minds made up about what Jesus is saying, or we've decided that they're too confusing to make heads or tails of. Either way, he said, we usually run the risk of getting them dead wrong. When I was younger and I picked them up, I thought they were all about what Jesus is telling us we

ought to do. The parables, like the beatitudes, were sort of a recipe for becoming a perfectly lovely person. Be *like* the good Samaritan and *not like* the Pharisee. But what if the parables are, first and foremost, not about us at all. What if they are about God. About how God works in this world – the mysterious, strange, and sometimes incomprehensible way that God deals with us, because the parables are strange things.

Jesus, being the consummate story-teller, fills his with all kinds of small twists, the little turns and details that at first may be difficult to notice. One can read through the parables a dozen times in a dozen years and on the thirteenth, all of a sudden see something new and fresh that was hidden there all along, but that we'd never seen before.

So, tough assignment or no, here we have a couple of parables that talk about lostness that often play second and third fiddle to the parable of the prodigal son, which follows immediately after them.

The stage that Luke sets is already tense – Jesus is at work doing the precise thing that he has come to do, proclaim good news to the least, and last, when the perennial antagonists of the gospels, the Pharisees, come crowding in to offer their condemnation of Jesus' obscenely gracious activity. Ken Bailey, whose scholarship is deeply influenced by more than three decades of living in the Middle East, sheds a little light on the situation. In his book, *Finding the Lost*, he describes the tension between the Pharisees and the common people who didn't observe strict ritual cleanliness at meal times. For a teacher to be sitting among the unclean was thought to be fundamentally incompatible with their religious system. So they reason, "This man Jesus, welcomes sinners, and he eats with them, therefore he must be like these sinners". In other words, they are angry with him about the very purposes for which he came in the world.

So, in the midst of an acted parable, God-in-the-flesh, eating and having a good time with the lost and outcast, Jesus tells us three stories in rapid succession which all point toward the fact that the offensiveness of this whole scene is precisely the way this whole grace thing works.

“I want you to imagine that you have one hundred sheep,” he says to the Pharisees and the sinners around him. “I want you to imagine that you have a hundred sheep and that you lose one of them. Now, wouldn’t you, listener, go out after the lost one until you find it?” I imagine that the original hearers of this parable were just as perplexed by the question as we are. What’s the real answer? The real answer to that question is, “of course not.” Nobody who is in the sheep business would still be in the sheep business if he or she left ninety-nine of the flock behind for the wolves and the coyotes, to go out chasing after one. You’d cut your losses, forget about the lost sheep and move on with the ninety-nine. So Jesus’ question is a bit odd and slightly ironic. Who wouldn’t do this? Well, who would? Show me a physics teacher who will drop her responsibilities to all of her other students to tutor the troubled kid, asleep in the back row and I’ll show you a physics teacher with a short career. So then he says, “what would you do with the lost sheep if you’d actually gone out to look for it?” You would lay it on your shoulders and...here’s one of those points where the parable takes a left turn – he doesn’t tell us that the shepherd goes back to the ninety-nine that are left in the wilderness, and puts the sheep with the others, instead he puts the lost sheep on his shoulders and goes home to have a party.

What are we to make, then, of the ninety-nine that Jesus never mentions again in the parable? Let me suggest that they’re just a set-up. Jesus has divided his parabolic flock into one sheep and ninety-nine sheep, and he’s not going to the trouble of setting up two different groups – you know, something like the ninety-nine good sheep and the black sheep that got lost. I think what he’s saying is that the one sheep, the lost one, pretty much sums up the entire human race as it really is. And the ninety-nine “found” sheep who never manage to get lost is the entire human race as we like to think we are. So the ninety-nine are not a real entity in this business. The one lost sheep stands for all of us – and the only thing that the shepherd is interested in is going after the lost, even if it means going out of the shepherding business altogether.

That’s the business, Jesus tells his listeners, that God goes out of when he goes after the lost because they are the only ones he’s even remotely interested in finding. While the audience stirs a bit in their chairs, Jesus tacks on a closing thought: “I say to you that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous

persons who need no repentance.” And the proof of this, of course; did you ever meet any of those ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance? In fact, I have more than a hunch that there are not nor have there ever been such people anywhere. So God, like Jesus, is only interested in the lost and is thumping the tub for the saving paradox of first being lost in order to be found.

Without so much as taking a breath, Jesus mixes the metaphor and follows up the lost sheep parable with a lost coin parable – the God character is no longer a shepherd, but a woman, and a strange one at that. If the shepherd who leaves his sheep to look for one strikes us as odd, the woman who tears apart her home to look for a coin is even more odd. Jesus tells us that she has ten coins, and I picture her as a Silas Marner type character who keeps her coins in a nice treasure chest with a false bottom and a keyed pad lock. Every morning she ritualistically takes out her coins, gives them a polish and puts them back in her chest. She gets up one morning, we are told, and one of her precious coins is missing and this little episode interrupts her entire life. She suspends whatever other work she had to do for the day, whatever housework, lights a light and turns her entire house upside down in pursuit of the one lost coin. And, like the shepherd, we aren’t told whether she ever puts it back with the other coins. Instead she gets on the phone to her friends and neighbors and says, “Come on over, I’m going to have a party. I found my lost coin.”

I imagine that must have been an awkward invitation. These neighbors who didn’t know that she had lost a coin say, “Ethel, let me get this straight, you’re having a party because you found a coin, right? And we’re supposed to come?”

And she says, “Yes, we’ll have champagne and cake and it will be great; you’re going to come over and celebrate my coin that was lost, but now is found.”

“All right,” they say, “we’re on our way” debating whether to unfriend her from their facebook accounts.

The point is not whether others *understand* her joy, the point is *she has* joy – she is more excited about the one coin, as a matter of fact, than she is about the other nine sitting

quietly in their polished wooden box. Notice the small shift between the two parables. With the lost sheep you can work up a bit of pity because the little sheep might be hurt or afraid and all that. But try as you may, you can't muster any pity for a lost coin. A lost coin never knows that it's lost. From the coin's perspective, under the rug is as good as in the bank. What these two parables tell us together is that God's behavior toward us is not governed by our sins. It's not our problems. It's God's desire to find us in our lostness. These two parables work by the desire of the finder to find, not of the desire of the lost to be found. Neither the sheep nor the coin do a blessed thing except hang around in their lostness. Losing seems to be the mechanism of God's grace.

If we badger ourselves with the bleak notion that the lost must in some measure find themselves before the finder will get up to search for them – then we've strayed away from the point of the parable and also from Paul's thinking in Romans 5:8, "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us". The point is *what God does*.

Consider for a minute – all of these parables of lostness are not designed to convince us that if we wind ourselves up to some level of moral and/or spiritual improvement, God will then forgive us; rather they are parables about God's desire to move before we do – in all of the parables, including the prodigal son, it is the lost who end up at the party – in none of the parables do the found ever bother to show up either because they are a non-entity or because they are so outraged that God would spare no expense to throw a party for the tramps and the nobodies that they turn away from the very Jesus who proclaims good news to the poor, and release to the captives.

Perhaps you're thinking "that's all good and well, but you don't know what I'm really like. Yes, God goes after people, but He would never go looking for me."

Anne Lamott's book, "Traveling Mercies" tells a wonderful story of being found. She describes how her life was a complete mess, falling apart fast. She said she felt stiff and dying on the inside. She was drinking too much, was sick, feeling torn up from going through an abortion, she was hooked on sleeping pills. And one depressing night she lay on her bed and the world was spinning around. She writes:

"After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my (deceased) father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there -- of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus...I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian...I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die." I felt him sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love."

A week later she staggered into a church...and felt "...like the music... or something...was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling -- and it washed over me." I began to cry and left before the benediction..."and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said (to Jesus) "...Okay). I quit. You can come in."

When we are lost, that is when the shepherd goes looking.

It is hard to fathom that the Creator of the universe would care so much for the particulars, but this Jesus insists, is who this God is. And Jesus is the witness that this is who God is – God loved this lost and broken world so much that he came looking for us by being born in our midst.

We're all lost. But the good news is that God does not stop until we are found.