

## Lost and found

Luke 15:1-10 (September 11, 2022)

by Paul Matheson



Have any of you been frustrated by the number of construction projects around the city this summer? You try to go somewhere but can't get through. There's a road closure ahead, so you have to go around. The traffic's down to a single lane and the vehicles are moving slow. Haven't they been working on this stretch forever?

I've encountered many such things this summer on the way to work. The intersection at 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave. and 33<sup>rd</sup> Street. Certain portions of 7<sup>th</sup> Ave., off and on. 4<sup>th</sup> Ave., 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave, and now Spadina Cres. – for a second time. I've got a good mind to write the city about it!

Well, not really. I'm actually grateful that we have workers to keep our roads in good repair. But it's so easy to go *negative*. Even on a bright summer morning, when I should be glad to enjoy the fresh air and beauty of this wonderful season. Don't you hate that it's so short? Oops! There I did it again! *Complain*, I mean, about the shortness of the summer season. See how quickly we revert to this way of being?

We *love* to complain about all kinds of things: traffic, weather, neighbours, crime, politics, taxes, prices, shortages, poor service. Do any of this sound familiar to you?



Our scripture reading this morning begins with *complaint*. The Pharisees and scribes are the ones who are doing it. They're complaining, as religious people often do, about the state of the world. And, in this case, about one person who doesn't seem to have any problem hanging out with folks of questionable character.

The religious leaders were grumbling about Jesus, and the fact that tax collectors and sinners seemed to be attracted to him. Which didn't make them very happy. There they were: heads shaking, eyebrows frowning, fingers pointing. "This fellow," they said – and in Greek it carries a rather negative connotation – "This guy, this so-and-so, whoever he is ... he welcomes sinners and eats with them."

"Can you believe it? What is the world coming to?" Jesus must have overheard their criticism, because he immediately responded by telling them a parable.

Three parables actually. Or one parable with three parts, depending on how you divvy it up. But they're all getting at the same thing: They're responding to religious people who complain about the company Jesus keeps. Who's invited into the circle? Can sinners come? Are moral failures allowed to be here? Do we have to live up to a certain standard in order to be named as one of Jesus' friends? In order to enjoy the fellowship of his table?



"Which one of you," asks Jesus, pointing at *us* now, "having a hundred sheep and losing one, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness to go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"



I'm no sheep farmer. But the simple math of it raises some serious questions. *Ninety-nine* sheep that are safe in the fold, verses *one* that's lost its way. Would I leave the ninety-nine? Not likely, not if I'm supposed to be the one looking after them. Traipsing off on some ill-considered misadventure, leaving the rest of the flock exposed to danger – that doesn't sound right. By the time I returned, maybe five more would be missing!

Look, it's *only* one, right? Ninety-nine percent of the flock are safe and sound. That sounds pretty good to me. What do you think? What is proper pastoral practice? What would God want us to do?



The shepherd in Jesus' parable goes off to find the one that's lost. When he does find it, he's overjoyed. He hauls the sheep up over his shoulder and marches home with a huge smile on his face, singing cheerfully all the way. He is so thrilled to be reunited.

When the shepherd arrives back home he does another unexpected thing. He calls his friends and neighbours and invites them to a party. Yes, you heard that right, a party. Over one lost sheep. Why make such a fuss?



Are parties really necessary? All that energy wasted. And for what purpose? Wouldn't it be best for the shepherd to go home and get a good night's sleep? Tomorrow's another big day with much work to be done.

"Which of *you* would do what this shepherd does?" asks Jesus. And I'm guessing the answer is not very many. This shepherd is acting a little crazy. And we are very serious, very sensible, very practical, religious people.



The second section of the parable follows the same pattern we found in the first. Only this time it's not a shepherd, it's a housekeeper, a woman. And it's not a sheep that's gone missing, it's a *coin*.



She had ten of them. But now, when she goes to count them, there are only nine. Where could it possibly be?

This part of the parable is easy for me to relate to. I know very little about sheep, but I have much experience with things that go missing: "Where are my keys? Where did I leave my glasses? Have you seen my wallet lying around?"

These things happen at the most inconvenient times. So I rush around, going from room to room, growing more unpleasant by the minute. I feel sorry for whoever happens to be nearby. "Can't you see I'm looking for something! Where could it be?"

Ten coins, one goes missing.

First century houses, at least for common people, had mostly dirt floors and were poorly lit. Just imagine how easy it was to lose things. “Which of *you*,” asks Jesus, “would do all this: lighting a lamp, sweeping the floor, meticulously searching until you find it?”



Here again, I have to say I probably wouldn't. I'd look for a while, then go on to something else, hoping it would turn up later. Besides, it's only a coin.

*One* coin. I have nine others. And that will do for now.

And this I can tell you for sure: If I did find that coin I wouldn't go around to my friends and neighbours inviting them to rejoice. I'd be too embarrassed to admit I'd lost the thing in the first place! I'd keep it to myself. And breathe a sigh of relief. I certainly wouldn't throw a party. Why, you could easily spend a coin or two on that! Find a coin to spend a coin? How does that make any sense?

“Who among *you* would do that?” asks Jesus, in both sections of this parable. “Who would go to such lengths to find what is lost? And who would throw such an extravagant, over-the-top celebration?”

The answer for those religious leaders, so full of complaint, would be *none* of them. And that is Jesus' point: None of them care for the lost. None of them celebrate the work of God. Because that's precisely what God is doing in the person of Jesus: Saving sinners, gathering the lost, setting them down to feast at the table of God's kingdom. And all those leaders do is complain!

*We* wouldn't complain about that, would we?



Here's the thing: That one lost sheep, that one lost coin – they might seem like nothing in the great grand scheme of things: Just *one* of so many. But to God they are precious! You are precious, I am precious. In the realm of God we are all highly valued. We have a hard time believing this. In a world as large as the one we live in.

We consistently downplay our value in our own mind's eye. We play strange, morbid number games: How many deaths are acceptable for us to achieve a victory in war? How many people will die from disease or starvation in places far away before we intervene? How many Covid deaths in care homes among the elderly? How many drug overdoses on the street before we act? But for God, no one is expendable. God's calculus and ours are quite different.



“God so loved the world,” said Jesus. It's one of those scripture verses many of us memorized as children. But I wonder if we realized the radical nature of what Jesus was saying. God so loved the *world*. All of it. Everyone, everywhere. In the church and out of the church. And not just people we call good.

When Jesus says “world” he means even that part of God's creation that stands in opposition. The world he came to, but “received him not.” The world that hung him on a cross. The world that included even some of his own disciples, who betrayed him and denied him.

The world is everywhere, sometimes even in us. But Jesus loves us anyway. When he sees that we're utterly lost, he comes searching, determined to bring us home.

“There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.” Ninety-nine people who *think* they’re righteous, but are so tragically mistaken. (Who, in their right mind, thinks they are living completely in the will of God?)

Apparently those religious leaders did. And *we* can so easily fall into the same delusion: “We’re the righteous. They’re the sinners. Jesus, how can you associate with such as these?”



*Every life matters to God. Can we live that way?*

I want you to notice this picture, which is also on the front of your bulletin. It’s a picture of Jesus, the good shepherd, painted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

What’s striking to me is the *realism* of it. This is no sanitized Jesus, all pristine and fresh out of the shower. This Jesus looks tired. Like he’s been up all night. And he appears dirty and sweaty, as you might expect after scrambling over rocks and thorns to rescue his beloved sheep.

Imagine the woman in our story. After searching all day for that coin, she finally sits down for a cup of tea. Her hair is messy and tangled. A wisp of it falls, untamed, over her brow. What a time she’s had! She’s covered in dust. Her clothes are wrinkled, her apron’s ready for the wash. But she’s found it! Hallelujah! She’s found that missing coin.

The Jesus we worship is like that –that *shepherd*, that *woman*. His love is costly and it takes him to difficult places. Look how far the love of God will go to bring you home!



Christ as the good shepherd, by Lucas Cranach the Younger (1515-1586)



Can we love like that? I’m not sure we have the capacity for it. We can’t save the whole world. But we know one who can. And so, in our own limited way, we open our lives to others – one at a time. We love that individual as they are. We invite them into our fellowship. And we pray the grace of God will make our love deeper, broader, stronger, more enduring. Love that welcomes a long-lost sheep who’s wandered far away. The one that’s hard to love. The one who wears us out. The one we’re tempted to give up on.

We do this, not out of some grim religious duty, but with the awareness that God has already done the same for us. We ourselves are sinners saved by grace. And having already been drawn into the *joy* of God’s kingdom, there’s nothing we want more for others! “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”



The kingdom of God is not for complainers. It’s for party-goers! Those who are willing to give up their negativity and share a celebration. Have I given up my negativity? Well, not all of it. But I trust that God is still working in my life, and in your life, enlarging our capacity for love.

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!” Yes, of course he does. And what a joy it is to see! The work of God goes on, redeeming the world, gathering in all of God’s beloved. All of them. Not one will be forgotten.

The Pharisees and the scribes were complaining. But we are invited to rejoice. And to be grateful for the grace of God in Jesus Christ that finds us, and carries us in arms of love until we reach our home.