

## **Pentecost 14C, Proper 19. Luke 15:1-10. September 15, 2019.**

These parables of the lost and found are a great comfort to us because we, too, have been lost. Hopefully we have since been found, but we have been lost and perhaps we have been lost in ways similar to these lost things: a sheep and a coin. I imagine this sheep getting lost not because it is willful or wicked, but just because it was so intent on getting to that next delicious clump of grass. And so staring down the whole time it just kept going on to the next pretty good clump of grass until it found itself in the wrong place and alone. Some of us have been like that, captivated by something that was pretty good, and pursuing it until we have wandered away from what is most good. And so we found ourselves lost, and needing to be found.

I have been lost like that, several times. Chasing a certain kind of career, or a relationship, or a particular pleasure, or a version of family. These are all good things, worth working for, but I forgot to look up and remember their proper place within a life touched by the love of God. It's not the next clump of grass, or the great career, or a certain pleasure that is the problem. It is when we let these smaller goods become all consuming that we find ourselves lost like this sheep.

Or again, perhaps we got lost more like how the coin was lost. It didn't make any decisions in the matter. It was dropped by someone else, and the way it was shaped made it roll. A combination of the way it happened to be and the carelessness of someone else lead to it being lost. We don't know how long it was missing—it may well have been long enough to feel forgotten, before this woman sweeps the house and scours the corners to find it. Some of us have gotten lost like this. Someone being careless, with or without malice, happens to touch us just where we happen to be most vulnerable. And we go crashing away and perhaps we end up feeling forgotten and all of this without us doing anything wrong at all. But we still end up lost and needing to be found.

Given the ways that we have been lost, as individuals or as communities, it's tremendously comforting to hear these parables of things being found, and our comfort is right and proper. But I don't want our comfort to make us forget how provocative these parables are. I don't want us to forget why Jesus is telling these stories or how these things get found. They get found because the God character in the parables throws all prudence to the wind and like someone obsessed risks everything to find them.

Jesus asks, "Which of you, having a hundred sheep, wouldn't leave ninety-nine of them to go find one who was lost?" And the answer of course is that no one would do this—no one would leave ninety-nine sheep unguarded at risk for the sake of one. And few people would skip a day's work to spend hours looking for a coin, and then spend a bunch more money throwing a party to celebrate finding the coin. I don't know how much money this woman made a day or how much her party cost, but her feverish search and riotous party don't feel to me like they fit within rational choice economic theory.

I don't want our comfort to make us miss this provocative picture of God's fierce love for us. God here is not a stern rule maker or a sedate old white-bearded man coldly observing and evaluating us. God is a shepherd risking everything to save us. God is a woman driven to a frenzy to find us. A passionate love for us burns in God's heart, and drives God into all kinds of unadvisable schemes, even up to sending the only Son to be one of us and redeem us.

And when we are redeemed, when we are found, Jesus assures us, God throws a party. Parties are a neglected theme of this reading. The shepherd and the coin woman throw parties, and the whole series of parables is set up by accusations that Jesus is having dinner parties with the wrong kind of people. There's something to hear there about unlearning as adults what our mothers told us about hanging out with the wrong kind of people. There's something to hear there about unlearning some prejudices about what kind of person belongs in church.

But the bigger point is this picture of a God who will risk anything and will not give up in a tenacious love for us. And as comforting as that is, it is that love that beats through our common life together. We are the people brought into being by that tenacious love. And, God help us, we are called to live by that love, to continue to give body to that love for the world. Because as surely as God has found or is finding us through that reckless, frenzied, celebratory love, God is loving everyone else just the same. And we are not only invited to God's party, we are among the hosts, called to share that love with the world.