

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday September 15, 2019 Proper 19C
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Text: Luke 15:1-10
Theme: Found by Joy

We all have stories about the losing and finding things that were dear to us. On more than one occasion I have shared the worry and anxiety of a parent whose child did not come home and did not communicate for more time than was comfortable and led to getting the police involved. That kind of loss is so scary it is almost paralyzing. But there are other kinds of lost. I have friends who one time were put in charge of the lost and found for a large missions conference in Urbana Illinois where close to 20,000 people were gathered. While a lot of the experience was mundane, they also were involved in some giddy moments of finding. Their favorite story was of someone turning in a wedding ring and their joy in seeing the young woman's face light up when she realized that her new wedding ring of only a few weeks had been found and was once again on her hand.

Lost and found is the theme of the parables we encounter in today's Gospel lesson from Luke. Throughout his ministry Jesus embraced a surprising table-fellowship without regard for his reputation. The table was a place of radical inclusion for Jesus and a constant source of criticism from the religious folks. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Jesus broke the rules of polite society and transgressed the boundaries of hospitality throughout his life. He demonstrated the coming Kingdom of God through the wildness of his dinner party seating chart.

But instead of getting into some sort of debate with the "churchy people of his day" or becoming defensive about his dinner party manners, Jesus does what he does so well, tells a story or a parable. Parables for Jesus were a kind of sweet revenge because everyone loves a good story until they realize that there may in fact be a hidden message in its web of words directed right between their own self-righteous eyeballs.

"Which one of you having a hundred sheep and one losing one of them, does not leave the 99 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 neighbors, saying to them. "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost, lets party." (Luke 15: 4-6).

I want to point out that Luke makes it clear that the activity of Jesus that elicits this parable is that he is hanging out with losers i.e. tax collectors and sinners were coming to him and that the upstanding citizens the Pharisees and the scribes, the winners of their day, were grumbling publicly about Jesus' clueless consorting with obvious losers. And Jesus then tells this juicy parable as a way of as one commentator put it, "rubbing the salt of lostness on the sensibilities of those who are preoccupied with the sweetness of their own success."

At first, the story of the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep to seek out the one that his lost is a touching story about the affection and dedication of the shepherd. But then when you begin to think about this kind of devotion and dedication to one sheep at the expense of the others the whole parable begins to seem a little crazy. I mean this is no way to run and successful sheep-ranching business is it? What is the most likely result of leaving the flock in search of the one lost sheep? I'll tell you what it is, 99 more lost sheep. In short, this is a kind of crazy story and not a particularly good advice for winning the Judean Hills Shepherder of the Year Award.

So, what is this parable really about? Could it perhaps be about the paradox of lostness? What if Jesus is trying to tell us something about God and his affinity for the lost? The whole parable seems to say something rather crazy, like this shepherd isn't really worried about 100 sheep getting lost, because it will not be a problem for this wildly talented Shepherd to round them up because after all that is precisely the business of the shepherd, finding the lost. This shepherd is not one to hedge his bets and stay with the 99 hoping to make a tidy messianic buck off the lot at market. No, this shepherd loves the lost, loves the losers, loves the real world just the way it is, full of 100 losers out of every 100. For this shepherd is the shepherd of the lost, that's his business and it is his joy to find and restore.

Lostness it seems comes in all shapes and sizes and I'm certain that each of us if we are honest about our real lives has a story of lostness. But no matter what we do about our own lostness, in this story and I think we could do something quite considerable; the real story is about one thing really and one thing only - Joy. Joy is the life-spring and motive of the shepherd's will to find. The shepherd scoops up the lost sheep, wraps it around his neck and skips home rejoicing singing Amazing Grace and inviting his friends to share his joy and bottle of the best Galilean wine he can find. Well, I added a few things to the story, but you get the point. The Shepherd of the Cosmic Lost and Found department finds his delight and joy in seeking and saving the lost. And thus, God is like the searching shepherd, not hedging his bets or playing it safe but tearing it up looking for the lost one, and rejoicing to highest heaven when one is found.

In Luke's version of the story the end of the parable ends with these words, "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:7)."

This is a strange and interesting ending to this parable because the word repentance or *metanoia* means to change one's mind or heart. And while that is a powerful theological word it really doesn't work all that well in the current parable or in the subsequent parable of the lost coin for which the woman is willing to move all the furniture, rip up the carpets and have her devoted husband move all the appliances out into the yard in order to find the lost coin. Why? Neither the lost coin nor the lost sheep was capable of any repentance at all. In both stories the central action of finding is wholly in the hands of the shepherd or the woman and their sheer determination to find the lost. The truth be told neither the lost sheep or the lost coin does anything to help them be found, they simply are lost. So, really it is our lostness, or if you prefer our sinfulness, and not our goodness or merit or striving or effort that place us most deeply in the grace and searching love of God.

These parables of lostness are really quite challenging the more you look them in the face. A lost sheep is really a dead sheep for all practical purposes, a lost coin is a dead asset. I don't believe that these parables are stories designed to convince us to straighten up and fly right or to strive for some sort of moral or spiritual improvement so that God will feel comfortable forgiving us. These parables, as far as I can tell, are not about repentance at all but about God's dogged insistence on seeking out the lost, about God's determination to move toward us even before we realize it. It is our lostness, our deadness, that are our tickets to the dinner party.

It is God's joy to discover the lost. It is God's joy to bring us home to the Supper of the Lamb. It is not our own efforts at repentance or our innate goodness that save us. Rather it is God alone who gives life, and who gives it without conditions without us deserving it.

These parables then are parables of grace and grace alone. There is not in them a single note of earning or merit. They do not speak of rewarding those who have worked really hard or of improving those who showed a lot of promise or of correcting those who could learn from their mistakes. Rather there is only the gracious and fierce determination to of the shepherd and of the woman both surrogates for God who seek out and save that which was lost or to put it another way to raise the dead into newness of life.

We like to think of ourselves as thoroughly in control of our lives. We like to think of ourselves as the main actors on our spiritual stage. We say things like, “I’m searching for some depth in my spiritual life,” or “I’m a very spiritual person,” or “I’ve decided to follow Jesus.” But this parable tells us something a bit different about our spiritual lives. It tells us that we can say with equal seriousness and delight that, “I’m being relentlessly pursued by God. He just won’t quit loving me, extending grace in my direction, wooing me into relationship.” Or God is always moving towards us.

The God of these parables is a God who is extremely determined to have us as his own. This is a God who spiritedly risks taking no for an answer, for God desires us. This is a God who like the shepherd and the woman who lost the coin, “seeks until he finds.” There is no giving up in this story. The joy of finding is so abundant that it must be shared, it cannot be kept private, there must be a party to which others are invited. In the end Jesus invites his critics and us to join him and all of heaven in the celebration of finding the lost.

There is a wonderful line in Eucharistic Prayer D that manages to say what these parables are talking about while offering us some sense of our own response to God’s searching love. It says this: “When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death. In your mercy to came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you (BCP 373).”

The truth is that each of us knows something about being lost. In our most sober and perhaps desperate moments, when we become quiet and brutally honest, all of us can admit to being lost. We all wonder at times what it’s all about? Why we seem to make the same painful mistakes over and over again? We all know that there is a deep loneliness the cuts across all income levels and settles into our lives like an unwelcome guest. We all know that there are places of death in our lives, places where things are not nearly as neat and tidy as we’d like to pretend they are. They are simply times in all of our lives that we long to be found when we don’t know where our lives are going or when our own foolish mistakes have taken us out beyond the safety of what we knew. Perhaps it’s not so bad to find yourself in the Cosmic Lost and Found department, to realize that you are dead or lost or powerless to save yourself, because the hilarious truth of the parable is this, God is looking for you. The Source of Life itself is in the lost and found business and is searching for you, and what is more the party celebrating your discovery is already planned. What is true is that God is always ready, like the searching shepherd, to scoop you up, throw you over his shoulders laughing with delight and turning with joy for home, calling all creation to the feast of celebration for what was lost has been found, what

was dead is alive again, what looked like failure is a new beginning. Wild joy is in the air electric with hope and there on the table is your name card for you too are an honored guest at the feast for all who were lost and there at the head of the table is Jesus, the wildest party planner in the universe, smiling with the wisdom of ages, his glass held aloft and toast forming on his lips to one more who was lost and has come home. Come to the feast this day, for God has been searching for you.

Note: I wish to acknowledge my debt to the most excellent commentary on the Parables of Grace by Robert Farrar Capon who inspired this sermon with his witty and penetrating analysis of the parables of Jesus.