

**Sept. 11, 2022  
Christ the Servant,  
Pentecost 14  
Luke 15:1-10**

**Today we have two familiar parables about being lost. The first one we know very well. It is the story Jesus told about the sheep. He poses a situation to his audience of Pharisees and scribes. He says to them, “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? And 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.’ ”**

**We remember that story about the lost sheep. Someone who knows psychology has said that we have a greater memory for stories about animals. But Jesus told a second parable which is just as good but not as well remembered. It is about the woman who had ten silver coins and lost one of them. She turned the house upside down trying to find it. And when she did find it, she called her friends and neighbors saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin I lost.”**

**Nice stories. Bible stories. Stories with meanings. Lots of rich messages for us to take home from those stories. But I am wondering what you might think if we changed them a bit. Let’s say the shepherd loses a sheep. He leaves the others, searches caves, climbs cliffs, and finally finds the lost one. Everybody celebrates. But the next summer he loses the same sheep – again! Fewer people come to celebrate. The next summer he loses it a third time. Now nobody comes. Now they’re beginning to think maybe it’s the shepherd’s fault this sheep is**

getting lost. Or the woman with the coin. She throws a party. But the next month she loses the coin again. The third time her girlfriends say to her, “Maybe you’d better be a little more careful with your money!”

Am I taking liberties in re-writing these parables? Well, if we take the traditional interpretation, maybe I am dabbling in heresy. The traditional interpretation wants to put God in the parable. But a whole universe of meaning is uncovered when we stop assuming the main character in Jesus’ parables is always God or Jesus. Sometimes the stories are told about us. That may be the case here. We assume that the one who is looking for the lost sheep is God. We are lost, but God finds us. It is the same way with the coin. The traditional interpretation is that we are like the coin that is lost and the housekeeper is God who searches and searches until he finds the lost soul. This interpretation has spawned hymns such as Amazing Grace which says, “I once was lost, but now am found.”

But think about this: If God (or Jesus) is the shepherd who loses the sheep, why did he lose it in the first place? Was God sleeping at the stick? If God is the housekeeper who lost the coin, what does that say about God as a housekeeper? Is God absent-minded? Oh, the sheep may have gotten lost all by itself, but that coin didn’t just walk over to the planter and hide behind it.

No In each of the parables the one who did the losing was a human being; a shepherd, a housekeeper. And in each story the human being did a very human thing; they lost something. Have you ever lost anything? I have! But, and here’s the key, in each story the person who did the losing was also responsible for doing the finding. The shepherd took responsibility to find the sheep he lost. The housekeeper took responsibility for finding the coin she lost.

Jesus told these stories in response to the Pharisees and scribes who were upset because Jesus ate and drank with unacceptable people. (Scripture says

**“sinners.”) We might imagine they were extortioners or thieves or prostitutes. Jesus is telling this story about people who has been lost – lost by power structure, lost by the political system, lost by the religious bureaucracy. In any case, they were lost.**

**Could it be that Jesus was saying to the Pharisees and scribes, “You are offended by these people I hang around with. But these are people you lost. You have lost them over and over again and you aren’t even looking for them! Let me tell you a couple of stories about how rewarding it is when we help people we are responsible for losing. Let me tell you how rewarding it is for you, how rewarding it is for God!”**

**Who are the people our society has lost? Let me start a list. I’m sure you could add to it. The poor. We expect people who have no boots to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. The homeless. How do we help them? We pass laws to tear down tent cities. Immigrants. We would just rather they stay on their side of the line. Trans people. The disabled. The mentally ill. All of these are people we seem to lose time and again.**

**Anyone who is part of a minority is often viewed as somehow lacking or less worthy. Whatever group is in power comes up with the “ideal” of what is normal and anyone who runs against that ideal is either forgotten or denied altogether because their very existence is offensive. The Pharisees were offended by those Jesus hung with.**

**But Jesus said, “These are the lost and lonely. They become lost time and again. You are not even looking for them. You just want them to go away.”**

**Then Jesus appeals to their human experience. Let’s pretend you lose a sheep. You look and look. Then you find it. Think how wonderful you would feel. Let’s pretend you lose a very valuable gold coin. You turn your whole house upside down to find it. But, there it is in the back of that drawer you never**

**look in. Think how happy you would be. Why, you would probably want to throw a party!”**

**Yes, Jesus is the one who searches for the lost. Yes, God is the one who has found us. Yes, we can read these parables as the basis for the hymn which goes, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind but now I see.” Yes, we can read these parables as stories about what God does. That’s the way they are usually read. But we can also read them as stories about how we should be the ones to do the searching. We need to take responsibility for the lost? Why? Two reasons: Because we are the ones who lost them in the first place and, two, God wants us to do this. And when we do these things, there will be great rejoicing. We can call our friends and neighbors together and throw a dinner. We’ll call it worship. And, oh, by the way, dinner is on the table and is about to be served.**