

"Lost Then Found"

Luke 15:1-10

Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost | Rally Day

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Christ the King Lutheran Church

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It is so good to find myself here with all of you today, dear friends of Christ the King. After a summer season filled with activities, lake cabins, work, vacations, hot summer days, welcome to this church, this community, this body of Christ in New Brighton. What a blessing it is to join with all of you as we seek to follow Jesus and grow in faith and love together in this place.

As we come together on this Rally Sunday, we hear two parables – two stories – from Jesus about lost things being found. A single sheep gets distracted and wanders off into the wilderness, so a shepherd sets out on a journey to find it. A small silver coin falls between some couch cushions or slips under a rug, and the coin's owner begins a process of housecleaning in order to recover that simple little shiny thing.

At first glance, these stories are so...*ordinary*. In fact, sheep and coins were lost so commonly that it makes you wonder whether those Pharisees and scribes got a little bored listening to these mundane anecdotes of Jesus. "We get it, Jesus," they might have said. "Things get lost. We look for them. We replace them. What's the big deal?"

I bet most of you could probably think of like a dozen little things that you've lost in the past week alone that you didn't lose any sleep over: a paper, some change, a sock, a pair of sunglasses, a hat...

And yet, for the people who lose these common things in Jesus' stories, well...they seem to think it's a very big deal. In fact, they each undergo something of a complete meltdown upon losing these items of relatively little value. Observe their behavior. The shepherd leaves his 99 other sheep exposed and vulnerable in the middle of a wilderness in order to head blindly in some random direction to look for a single sheep that may well already be dead or gone forever. As for the woman, well, after sweeping the whole house she finally finds her lost nickel and then is so excited about it that she throws her entire neighborhood a block party.

Something in these stories doesn't seem to fit. The shepherd, the woman...they behave as though they've lost something dearly beloved to them when in fact they've "only" lost a small, easily replaceable trinket, a tiny fraction of the total of their possessions.

And then here's the *really* odd thing. This worrisome shepherd, this thrifty woman: they, according to Jesus, are in fact a picture of who God is. The very same Eternal God who first breathed life over the waters of creation, this One...apparently *panics* whenever he loses the smallest of things. Jesus comes to announce the good news of a God whose love will not rest until all the lost are scooped up into God's wide and loving embrace.

So you probably see where this is going next. We – you and I – we are the coins and the sheep. Like coins and sheep, we get lost. We stray. We fall into cracks and hide away in secret, dark places of fear and isolation. But here is the promise: God will not rest until we are found.

According to these parables of Jesus, God is not some ruler who sits there waiting for us to crawl back to him on our hands and knees, repenting. God is not one who we seek or one for whom we must undergo personal self-help regimens in order to achieve salvation. No: God is the seeker! God is the One who comes running after us! God is the one who sweeps the home, who lights the lamp, who worries and worries and worries until we are at last at home in her loving care. As coins and sheep, we may not even know we are lost! And yet God will never rest until we are found.

Today, on this day, we hear Jesus' parables of the lost and the found in new and startling ways. It is hard to ignore the very present and very real parables of the lost happening in our own community and nation.

Twenty-seven years ago, a boy named Jacob Wetterling went missing – lost – from his home in St. Joseph, MN, never to be heard from again. Fifteen years ago, thousands of lives were lost in a terrorist attack in New York City, and the world would never be the same again.

So...God is like a shepherd who searches for the one sheep. God is like a woman who sweeps the house in search of the one coin. And yes, God is also like the mother of that boy named Jacob who searched and waited in agony for his return each day for twenty-seven years. And yes, maybe God is like those first responders who ran into burning buildings fifteen years ago, who died in their tireless efforts to find and recover each and every frightened heart.

And today, all these years later, as these stories return to us, it is hard not to feel lost all over again. These stories may make it harder for us to put our trust in our neighbors and communities. They may isolate us in fear, lock us behind doors where the terror in our world cannot harm us.

But, my friends, when we dwell within these feelings of lost-ness – feelings of resentment or fear or isolation or prejudice – we are forgetting the most

important thing about ourselves, about sheep and coins. The only reason that sheep and coins could ever be lost is that they first *belonged* to someone who loved them beyond measure or comprehension. We belong to a Love that will never leave or forsake us. We belong to a God who will come running after us, who will light a lamp in the darkened, dusty corners of our lives, and there is nothing we can do that will ever change that.

So what are we to do to keep from getting lost over and over again? It's a great question. And actually I think Jesus includes the answer to this question right in the parables. Notice that the stories do not end when the shepherd finds the sheep, or when the woman finds the coin. The shepherd: well, he tenderly hoists that lost sheep over his shoulders and walks it home to the 99 others. We belong to the shepherd, yes. But we find *belonging* within and among the faithful flock, in the company of believers. We need each other, we belong in this flock. So first, God calls us to belong to one another.

And then there's the woman. She finds that lost coin and then turns around and spends it on throwing a *huge party*. What's that all about? Clearly it was not the cash value that she was ever concerned about! Because I would bet she ended up spending far more than one coin on the celebration she threw. And there's the next call. After finding us again, God calls us to spend ourselves, to give ourselves away to feed and to share in communion with our neighbors.

And in *both* of these stories, there is JOY. God says, "Rejoice with me! For I have found what I have lost, and nothing else could ever fill me with more joy than that." So in the gathering together as a flock, and in the giving away of ourselves to the world – these things should always be accompanied by joy. After all, we belong to God!

Now, I realize that not all of you may be feeling particularly joyful in this moment, as routines of school and work begin again, or perhaps it's because you are carrying a heavy burden or unspoken grief. Even though we fill these pews, we still might very well feel lost. So, as I close here, let me give you two immediate ways that may help you leave with a little bit of this gospel JOY in your heart.

First: When we are found, when we are saved from sin and from ourselves, Jesus says at the end of this parable that the angels themselves rejoice! Angels, as you know, are messengers of God's good news. And looking out from this pulpit, I see a couple hundred messengers right now! So, as people who belong to God and to one another, I want you messengers – you angels out there – to turn to the people sitting around you and say, "Jesus loves you. You are not lost." Do it!

Second: If you're still feeling lost, still not feeling that joy of God's love, that is OK. So here's what you do next. Come to the table. Come eat the bread and the

wine. Hear the words of Jesus for you. And know by faith that here, in these simple and ordinary things, God is seeking you, running towards you, and finding you all over again. Thanks be to God. Amen.