

LOST...AND FOUND

Homily preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, March 6, 2016

First Congregational Church, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Text: Luke 15:1-32

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “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? 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.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”



Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father.



But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he

was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

When Jesus and the Pharisees get together, you can pretty much predict that their conversation will be controversial. Luke tells us in today's text that the "Pharisees and scribes" were "grumbling" about Jesus' table fellowship with "tax collectors and sinners." Overhearing their grumbling, which they apparently made little effort to conceal, Jesus answered their complaints by telling three parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the prodigal son (which is actually a parable of two lost sons). No doubt John Newton, the slave trader turned abolitionist who is the author of "Amazing Grace," had this chapter of Luke's Gospel in mind when he wrote of himself, "I once was lost, but now am found."

Jesus' parables, regardless of how long or how short, always invite the readers or hearers to find ourselves somewhere in the story. In the parable of the lost son, Jesus invites us as readers to identify with the lost son, and/or with the father, and/or with the older son. In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus invites us readers to identify with the shepherd, and/or with the one lost sheep, and/or with the ninety-nine sheep left alone, without their shepherd. It's a little different in the case of the parable of the lost coin. I mean, a coin is an inanimate object. It's valuable, but it's not living. How can we identify with a coin? That's a bit of a challenge.

We can, however, readily and easily identify with the woman in the parable who has lost this one silver coin—whose value was perhaps the equivalent of a day's wages, or the equivalent of one sheep. She has lost something valuable. And so she sweeps the floor of her home persistently until she finds that which she had lost.

A few years ago, I lost my car keys on a soccer field near the softball field where I had been having some batting practice. Although I didn't have a broom, I did conduct a thorough sweep of the soccer field, and then some, walking over what I thought was every square foot of the field, not just once, but twice. No luck. Fortunately, I had my cellphone in my pocket, so I was able to call my wife Mary and she drove to the field and brought me the spare key to my car.

The next morning I drove back to the field and started searching again. Within just a few minutes I found my lost keys. They were in a small section of the field that I had ignored the previous day, having convinced myself that I hadn't been in that section of the field and therefore couldn't have lost my keys there. Well, I was wrong. Expanding my search area by just a few feet led me to my lost keys. And I rejoiced. I called Mary on my cellphone to let her know, but I didn't throw a party that morning. Still, I was both joyful and relieved to find that which I had lost.

Just so, says Jesus, "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Now what's interesting about my lost keys and the woman's lost coin is that neither of these inanimate objects is capable of

repentance. The lost sheep in the story isn't capable of repentance. My beloved little dog Maddie isn't capable of repentance. Only we human beings are culpable of sin and capable of repentance.

Consider for example the protagonists in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. Both the father and his two sons are culpable of sin, that is, for acting in ways that break the bonds between them and among them. The younger son sins by asking for his portion of the family inheritance while his father is still alive—thus treating his father as if he were dead. The father sins by acceding to this request—thus allowing his son to treat him as if he were dead. The older son sins by refusing to join in the celebration of his younger brother's return home—thus treating both his brother and his father with disrespect.

The protagonists in these parables are for me striking images of the human condition before God. My image of the human condition before God is that we are like the lost sheep or the lost coin or the lost sons. And God is like a shepherd who hikes into the wilderness to find and retrieve a lost sheep, and to restore that sheep to the flock. God is like a woman who has lost a valuable coin and does not rest until she has found her lost silver coin and put it back in her purse with the other nine silver coins.

In the story of a father who has two sons, God is like a father, or a mother, who extends an amazing welcome to a repentant child who returns home, a child who once was lost but now is found. God is like a mother, or a father, who extends a loving invitation to the resentful other child, the child who has always been a faithful member of the family.

What is also true for me about the human condition is that in our freedom, it is so easy for us to lose our way. When we fail to show respect toward those with whom we disagree, we have lost our way. When we judge others by the color of their skin and not by the content of their character, we have lost our way. When we neglect to do justice, to love mercy, or to walk humbly together with God, we have lost our way. When we choose not to practice the Golden Rule, we have lost our way.

Sometimes the first step toward getting found is to realize that you are lost. In the parable of the lost sons, the younger son finally “comes to his senses,” realizes how spiritually lost he is, and decides to return home with repentance in his heart. But will the older son also come to his senses, and realize that he too is spiritually lost because of his anger and his resentment?

Nanette Sawyer, who is “the founding pastor of Wicker Park Grace, an emerging faith community that gathers in an art gallery on the west side of Chicago,” connects today's passage with her experiences and observations of loss and grief:

“To say that God is like a woman who has lost one coin doesn’t really capture for me the grief of lost or broken relationship. Perhaps Jesus had to speak in terms that would capture the imaginations of the rich Pharisees. But I do think that in relation to us, God is like a woman (or a shepherd or a parent) who has lost a loved one and lost her wholeness. Without the one that is lost, God’s heart is broken. But God doesn’t just want to get back together with the one. God wants to get the one back with the ninety nine (or with the nine or with the family) so that whatever community has been broken can be restored to wholeness.”¹

Think on this, sisters and brothers: When God gazes upon our human condition and sees what a mess we sometimes make of the freedom that God has given us, God is broken-hearted.

And what does God do with this broken heart? God does not give up on us.

God goes into the wilderness to find us, and brings us back to our senses and our community, and rejoices.

God keeps sweeping the floor until God finds us and reunites us with her and the other silver coins that were not lost. Even when we may have given up on ourselves, and we may lie motionless on the floor like a lost coin, God sweeps the floor until she finds us and will not let us go.

God looks longingly every day out toward that far country where we have gone to find ourselves, but have lost ourselves instead. God looks gratefully every day out toward the fields where we are working faithfully. In brokenheartedness and thankfulness, God wishes nothing more than our reconciliation, not only with one another, but also with God. Whoever we are, wherever we are on life's journey: Let us come home from afar, let us come in from the fields, and let us rejoice together.

¹Nanette Sawyer, “Broken Hearts, Broken Communities,” <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/yearc/ordinary24gospel/>. Accessed online on 09/11/2013.