

Finding things that are lost. It's always a nice feeling to find something that you've lost. There's always that wonderful sense of joy and relief. And the longer you've been looking for something you've lost, the happier you are when you've found it.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus speaks of losing and finding and rejoicing.

The background is this. The Pharisees have been grumbling because Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. So Jesus responds with three parables about things that are lost. The third one is the famous parable of the Prodigal Son, the Lost Son. But our list of readings had that as a separate lesson that we read back in March.

Today, we hear the first two parts of the 3-part series of lost parables: the parable of the Lost Sheep, and the parable of the Lost Coin.

Parable 1--Jesus begins, "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?"¹ (Uh-huh. Sounds good.)

"When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices."² (Yea!)

"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.'"³ (Sure, Jesus. That's what would happen.)

"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."⁴ (Okay. God must love those sinners.)

Parable 2: "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?"⁵ (Sounds logical.)

"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.'"⁶ (Um-hum. That's what she'd do.)

"Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."⁷ (Yeah, Jesus, that's pretty much what you said at the end of the other parable.)

¹ Lk 15:4

² Lk 15:5

³ Lk 15:6

⁴ Lk 15:7

⁵ Lk 15:8

⁶ Lk 15:9

⁷ Lk 15:10

Jesus asks all of these rhetorical questions. And we answer, "Yes, uh-huh, sure, that's right, that's what I'd do." And do you know what? Jesus has pulled a fast one on us. We fell for it. He slipped it right by, and we didn't even see it.

Who among you having 100 sheep and losing 1 will not leave the 99 behind and go off searching for the 1? Don't answer too quickly. Who wouldn't leave 99 behind to search for 1? If you look more, Jesus said, who wouldn't leave 99 sheep behind IN THE WILDERNESS to search for 1 lost sheep?

I sure wouldn't. The wilderness is a dangerous place. The 99 sheep could be eaten by wolves while I'm off looking for 1 sheep that may already be dead. And I might never find the lost sheep. I'm not going to roll the dice and risk the safety of the 99 sheep in my flock on the off chance I can find the 1 sheep that's lost.

Who among you, having \$100 and losing \$1, would leave the \$99 sitting in the middle of the sidewalk while you start backtracking and looking for the \$1 bill you may have dropped a few blocks back? Doesn't make much sense, does it?

Who among you would risk losing 99% of your portfolio in order to make a 1% profit. Not a good move. You'd be better writing off the 1% as a minor loss.

Plus, the rejoicing bit. Who would call all of their friends and say, "I found my lost dollar bill, let's have a party?" Seems way out of proportion.

Or the woman with the coin. She loses it. But Jesus says she'll keep looking until she finds it.

Oh, really? Sure, the coin was worth about \$50 in our economy. If I dropped a \$50 bill in the house, I'd look for it. Yes, I'd ask Renee to help. But I wouldn't keep looking for it "until I found it." I might spend a little while looking for it. But I'm not going to spend 3 days looking for it. "Sorry y'all, I can't come preach today, I'm looking for my \$50 bill." After a little while, I'll give up, and hope it turns up later. But Jesus says, that the woman will keep looking "until she finds it."

Again, Jesus has pulled a fast one on us. It turns out, this is not the way that we'd behave. But what Jesus is telling us, is that this IS the way God behaves. He's telling us that God has an enormous desire to find the lost. God will take great risks to find and save sinners. God will risk 99 for the sake of the 1.

"There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." What's more than that, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Not the way we would do things. But Jesus is telling us, it is the way God does things.

And when you think about it, that's Good News. Because truly, there's no such thing as 99 righteous people. The 99% may think they're righteous. But that's not possible. We all far short of who God has created us to be.

We hurt ourselves. We hurt others. We hurt our relationship with God. We don't act lovingly toward God, and we don't love our neighbors as ourselves.

And there is a classic biblical word for people like us: sinners. That's a word that's not very popular in our culture. But by definition, we are all sinners.

Being sinners is not about breaking some arbitrary set of rules. Sin is about falling short of who we're created and called to be by God.

And we all fall short. Thus we all stand in need of forgiveness. We all need to make changes in our lives. And we need to grow. That puts us squarely in the 1% that Jesus comes to save.

After all, if we're talking about human beings, there's no 99% who are righteous. There can be 99% who are self-righteous, who think they don't need to repent, or change. But that doesn't change the reality. All of us need a savior, from the Pharisee to the prostitute to the parishioner to the priest.

And we have a loving Shepherd. He is the Good Shepherd. And our Good Shepherd has a passion for finding us. Total passion. He is willing to give his own life on our behalf. He is willing to shed his blood so that we might be saved.

And notice in the parables, it's not even about what we do. It's about who God is and what God does. The shepherd looks for the sheep. The woman searches for the coin. It's not about the sheep or the coin doing anything special. It's about the tremendous love of the one who will seek us out no matter what. It's about the joy that comes from knowing that that's the nature of the God who loves us, the God who rescues us, who seeks us out, who saves us.

As Paul said in our Epistle lesson, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."⁸

For centuries in Episcopal worship, and even today at our 8:00 service this is one of the so-called "comfortable words," or verses of comfort that come after the confession. In the old 16th century language: "This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."⁹

In fact, that's such a wonderful statement, and the context is so wonderful, that it deserves a deeper look.

⁸ 1Tim 1:15

⁹ BCP p. 332

Before his conversion, Paul was public enemy #1 for the church. He admits it himself today: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence."¹⁰

Paul was so dangerous that, in his culture, most people would expect a vengeful God to strike him down and kill him. And God did strike Paul down. Not with death. But with the overwhelming presence of the Risen Christ. It caused Paul temporary physical blindness that allowed him to overcome his previous spiritual blindness.

Paul puts it this way. "The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."¹¹ What wonderful words to describe God's actions. Overflow of faith and love. And it leads Paul to say,

"The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners —of whom I am the foremost."¹²

Paul would be the first to admit that he was a sinner. He used to think he was part of the righteous 99%. It turned out he was a lost sheep. But Jesus came after him, even though he was public enemy #1, sinner #1. Why? Paul says, as an example. The foremost sinner receives mercy, becoming the ultimate example of God's tremendous love.

And for that, Paul can only offer praise, "To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever."¹³ What else can we do? What other response can there be?

We're not part of the 99. We're part of the 1. Yet God seeks us out. Jesus came into the world to save us. There is rejoicing in heaven over us, when we allow ourselves to be found. From a human standpoint it may not make sense. Maybe God should just write off the 1% as a loss. But he doesn't. He risks everything for us. What wonderful, overflowing love.

An ancient prayer says, "How wonderful and beyond our knowing, O God, is your mercy and loving-kindness to us, that to redeem a slave, you gave a Son."¹⁴

To our loving God be honor and glory forever and ever.

¹⁰ 1Tim 1:13

¹¹ 1Tim 1:14

¹² 1Tim 1:15

¹³ 1Tim 1:17

¹⁴ BCP p. 287