

Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home.

Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins^[a] and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'

¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO REFUSE TO ADMIT THEY ARE LOST AND SO THEY COME UP WITH WAYS TO EXPLAIN IT A WAY.

ONE SAID: "I'M NOT LOST, I'M JUST EXPLORING." ANOTHER ASKED: "IF YOU NEVER GET LOST, ONCE IN A WHILE, HOW DO YOU EXPECT TO FIND YOURSELF?"

THEN THERE IS THE ONE WHO INSISTED: "I NEVER PANIC WHEN I GET LOST, I JUST CHANGE WHERE IT IS I WANT TO GO."

TODAY'S GOSPEL READING IS ABOUT THOSE WHO GET LOST AND GOD DESIRES TO FIND, THROUGH HIS "SEARCH AND RESCUE" MISSION.

IN FACT, THE MAIN POINT JESUS WAS MAKING IN THE PARABLES HE TOLD WAS THAT GOD'S NATURE IS ONE THAT SEEKS THE LOST, AND REJOICES WHEN THEY ARE FOUND.

BUT LET US BEGIN WITH WHAT COMPELLED JESUS TO SHARE THE PARABLES.

HE WAS HAVING A MEAL WITH THOSE WHOM THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES VIEWED AS MORALLY UNFIT FOR SOMEONE LIKE JESUS, AS A RABBI, TO FELLOWSHIP WITH.

TODAY THE CLOSEST EQUIVALENT, FOR SOME CHRISTIANS AND OTHERS WOULD BE FOR A PASTOR TO BE SEEN IN A BAR, ESPECIALLY DRINKING ALCOHOL.

WHILE MANY CHRISTIANS WOULD NOT BE BOTHERED BY THAT, OTHERS CERTAINLY WOULD BE.

I EVEN HEARD ABOUT ONE MAN WHO CHANGED CHURCHES BECAUSE HE SAW HIS PASTOR DRINKING A BEER.

IT WAS SOMEONE LIKE THAT WHO CRITICIZED JESUS, NOT OVER WHAT HE WAS EATING OR DRINKING, BUT BECAUSE OF THE COMPANY HE KEPT.

JESUS DEFENDED HIMSELF CONCERNING THIS ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS WITH STATEMENTS LIKE: "THOSE WHO ARE WELL DO NOT NEED A PHYSICIAN- BUT THE SICK DO."

AND HE ALSO SAID- "... THE SON OF MAN CAME TO SEEK AND TO SAVE THE LOST."

IN TODAY'S GOSPEL PASSAGE HE RESPONDS BY TELLING THREE PARABLES MEANT TO EXPLAIN HIS ACTION, AS WELL AS HIS FATHER'S NATURE.

IT IS THE FIRST TWO OF THOSE STORIES WE HAVE HEARD AND WILL LOOK AT MORE CLOSELY THIS MORNING.

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP IS ONE OF THE BEST LOVED STORIES JESUS TOLD. AND JESUS MIGHT HAVE DRAWN HIS INSPIRATION FOR IT FROM EZEKIEL 34:11-12

THIS IS WHAT THE LORD GOD SAYS: "I, MYSELF, WILL SEARCH FOR MY SHEEP AND TAKE CARE OF THEM. AS A SHEPHERD TAKES CARE OF HIS SCATTERED FLOCK WHEN IT IS FOUND, I WILL TAKE CARE OF MY SHEEP.

I WILL SAVE THEM FROM ALL THE PLACES WHERE THEY WERE SCATTERED ON A CLOUDY AND DARK DAY."

SIMILARLY, MANY CHRISTIANS THINK FONDLY OF THE IMAGE OF HOW THEY WERE SAVED, BY JESUS COMING TO FIND THEM AND BRING THEM HOME.

IT SPEAKS ABOUT OUR VALUE TO GOD. IT IS COMFORTING TO KNOW GOD LOVES AND WATCHES OVER EACH OF US INDIVIDUALLY, AND NOT JUST COLLECTIVELY.

THE STAINED-GLASS WINDOW IN THIS SANCTUARY THAT SHOWS JESUS CARRYING A LAMB IN HIS ARMS IS A GOOD IMAGE OF THIS.

THERE ARE ALSO A COUPLE OF OTHER SHEEP WALKING BESIDE THE SAVIOR LOOKING UP AT HIM.

IT IS EASY TO IMAGINE THE SHEEP ARE HAPPY NOT ONLY TO SEE THEIR GOOD SHEPHERD, BUT ALSO THE LAMB WHICH HE FOUND.

WHAT A BEAUTIFUL DEPICTION OF SALVATION THIS IS FOR ALL WHO CAN PERCEIVE IT.

BUT WHAT CHRISTIANS MAY FORGET TO THINK ABOUT IS HOW WE GET LOST OVER AND OVER AGAIN, THROUGH SIN.

CONSEQUENTLY, ALTHOUGH WE ARE SAVED THROUGH CHRIST, THIS DOES NOT MEAN WE NEVER GO ASTRAY, ONLY IT IS OFTEN EASIER TO BE BROUGHT BACK HOME TO GOD.

INDEED, IT MAY ONLY TAKE THE SOUND OF HIS VOICE IN OUR HEART OR MIND AND WE REALIZE WE ARE LOST, AND SO WE FOLLOW THE LORD'S VOICE BACK TO HIM.

IT IS GOOD NEWS THAT GOD IS COMPASSIONATE, AND COMMITTED TO HIS WORK OF SEARCH AND RESCUE.

AND THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN LOST AND FOUND BY THE LORD CAN TRULY APPRECIATE THE LORD'S FAITHFULNESS, EVEN TO THOSE WHO WANDER AWAY OVER AND OVER AGAIN.

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST AND FOUND SHEEP WAS A CLEVER WAY FOR JESUS TO EXPLAIN WHY HE HUNG AROUND WITH KNOWN SINNERS.

TRULY, PEOPLE CAN BE LIKE SHEEP, THIS INCLUDES CHRISTIANS WHO MAY WANDER AWAY AND GET LOST IN SIN AGAIN.

HOWEVER, JESUS TOLD ANOTHER PARABLE WHICH SPEAKS ABOUT GOD'S CONCERN FOR THOSE WHO DO NOT KNOW, OR WILL NOT ADMIT, THAT THEY ARE LOST.

THESE PEOPLE. IN A WAY, ARE MORE LIKE THE LOST COIN THAN THE LOST SHEEP.

I SAY "IN A WAY", BECAUSE WHEN A COIN OR OTHER THING THAT IS NOT ALIVE IS LOST, THE OBJECT IS NEVER AT FAULT SINCE IT CANNOT MOVE ON ITS OWN, NOR EVEN DESIRE TO DO SO. AND IT DOES NOT KNOW IT IS LOST.

PEOPLE CAN BE LIKE THE COIN IN THE PARABLE IN THE SENSE WE DO NOT ALWAYS KNOW WE ARE LOST.

THIS IS EXPRESSED IN ONE WAY IN PSALM 14:1 "FOOLS SAY IN THEIR HEARTS THAT THERE IS NO GOD."

THE POINT OF THE PARABLE IS GOD STILL PURSUES EVEN THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE IN GOD, OR THEIR NEED FOR SALVATION.

YES, GOD SEARCHES FOR, WITH THE DESIRE TO RESCUE, THOSE WHO THROUGH IGNORANCE OR ARROGANCE DISCOUNT OR IGNORE THE LORD.

BUT THE STORY ALSO SPEAKS TO A DIFFERENT TYPE OF LOST PEOPLE.

NOTICE, THAT IN THE SECOND PARABLE JESUS TOLD, THE COIN GOT LOST AT HOME, NOT OUT IN THE WORLD.

BUT FIRST, TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF THIS STORY, A LITTLE BACKGROUND MAY BE HELPFUL, TO EXPLAIN WHY THE WOMAN TOOK SO MUCH TIME AND EFFORT TO FIND ONE LOST COIN.

ONE REASON MAY HAVE BEEN FINDING IT WAS NECESSARY IN ORDER FOR HER TO MEET THE HOUSEHOLD NEEDS.

BUT A BETTER EXPLANATION IS PROBABLY THAT THE COIN WAS SIMILAR TO AN ENGAGEMENT OR WEDDING RING.

IN THE JEWISH CULTURE OF THAT DAY WHEN A MAN WAS GOING TO MARRY, HE WOULD NEGOTIATE A DOWERY PRICE WITH THE FATHER OF THE BRIDE.

WHEN THE PRICE WAS SETTLED THE YOUNG MAN WOULD OFTEN GIVE THE WOMAN 10 COINS TO SYMBOLIZE THE COVENANT OF A PROMISE FOR MARRIAGE.

THE 10 COINS SYMBOLIZED THE WOMAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BRIDEGROOM, AND AFTER THE MARRIAGE THEY WERE HERS TO KEEP.

THIS WOULD BE ONE REASON A WOMAN WOULD SEARCH AND SEARCH FOR A SINGLE COIN, AND CALL OTHERS TO REJOICE WITH HER WHEN SHE FOUND IT.

IN THE PARABLE THE COIN REPRESENTS THOSE WHO THEY A BELONGED TO GOD, AND YET GET LOST.

THE GOOD NEWS WAS, AND WHEN THAT HAPPENED GOD WOULD ALSO DILIGENTLY SEARCH FOR AND RESCUE THEM.

THE PROBLEM WAS, BECAUSE THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES BELIEVED IN GOD AND THOUGHT THEY WERE RIGHTEOUS, THEY WERE LIKE THE COIN IN THE STORY.

THEIR ERROR WAS NOT DENIAL OF GOD, BUT OF THEIR OWN SINFULNESS, THEREFORE THEY HAD NO IDEA THEY WERE LOST AND NEEDED TO BE FOUND.

WHAT JESUS WANTED BOTH THE RELIGIOUS JEWS WHO OPPOSED HIM, AND WHAT HE WANTS HIS FOLLOWERS TO ALSO UNDERSTAND, IS TWO THINGS.

FIRST, WE CAN AND WILL GET LOST, EVEN IF OUR WORDS AND ACTIONS AND CHOICES SEEM TO US AND OTHERS TO BE MORAL.

THE SECOND THING JESUS WANTS US TO HEAR AND BELIEVE IS THAT GOD'S SEARCHES AND SEEKS TO RESCUE EVEN THOSE WHO THINK THEY ARE JUST FINE, BUT ARE NOT.

A WOMAN NAMED EMILY SYLVESTER SHARED A REFLECTION ABOUT THIS DRAWN FROM HER OWN EXPERIENCE.

SHE SHARED THAT A FEW YEARS AGO HER DAUGHTER WAS SITTING BESIDE HER AND HER HUSBAND IN CHURCH.

AND WHEN THE COLLECTION CAME, THE GIRL PUT A HAND-FULL OF PENNIES IN THE PLATE.

HER MOM MUST HAVE LOOKED SURPRISED, SO SHE QUIETLY SAID, "THE KIDS AT SCHOOL SPIN PENNIES AT EACH OTHER DOWN THE HALLWAY.

AND SOMETIMES I FIND STRAY PENNIES NO ONE ELSE HAS PICKED UP YET. I SAVE THEM FOR THE COLLECTION PLATE."

MONTHS LATER THE WOMAN RECALLED THE INCIDENT AND EXPLANATION AND DECIDED TO FIND OUT HOW MANY LOST COINS SHE COULD FIND IN A YEAR?"

SHE GATHERED COINS FOR A YEAR AND THEN BROUGHT THEM TO THE SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS SHE TAUGHT AS PART OF THE LESSON ON THE LOST COIN.

THEY COUNTED THE COINS IN CLASS, AND SHE EXPLAINED HOW SHE GOT ALL OF THEM, AND WHAT SHE DID AFTER SHE FOUND THEM.

IT ALL BEGAN WHEN SHE STARTED TO LOOK FOR STRAY COINS AND WHEN SHE FOUND ONE, SHE KEPT IT SEPARATE FROM HER OTHER MONEY.

SHE ALSO WASHED ALL OF THEM, WHETHER THEY LOOKED DIRTY OR NOT.

BUT SHE ADDED THAT WHILE SOME COINS WERE SHINY, OTHERS OF THE SAME VALUE WERE DIRTY, AND OTHERS SHE FOUND SOME THAT COULD BE DESCRIBED AS "ICKY".

THEN SHE EXPLAINED TO HER CLASS THAT THE SIGNIFICANT THING IS THAT WHETHER CLEAN OR ICKY OR IN BETWEEN- THE VALUE OF THE COIN NEVER CHANGED.

INDEED, THE VALUE OF A PENNY, NICKEL, DIME, QUARTER DOES NOT DEPEND OF HOW SHINY IT IS, BUT RATHER, IT STAYS THE SAME NO MATTER WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE.

THE WOMAN ALSO TOLD THE CLASS THAT THE TYPE OF COIN SHE FOUND DID NOT MATTER TO HER, SHE TOOK EQUAL DELIGHT IN SEARCHING FOR AND RESCUING EVERY KIND.

THIS IS NOT UNLIKE THE WORK OF THE LORD WHO SEEKS UNTIL HE FINDS AND RESCUES PEOPLE FROM EVERY RACE, TRIBE, NATION, SOCIAL CLASS, AND SO FORTH.

OUR VALUE IS NOT FOUND IN WHAT WE LOOK LIKE, OR WHETHER WE ARE MORALLY SHINY, OR ICKY, OR IN BETWEEN.

INSTEAD, OUR WORTH TO GOD OUR CREATOR IS THAT WE ARE ALL MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD, AND THUS ARE EQUALLY PRECIOUS.

FURTHERMORE, WHETHER WE ARE SPEAKING ABOUT SOMEONE WHO IS LIKE A SHEEP OR LIKE A COIN- WHENEVER, WHEREVER, AND WHOMEVER GOD FINDS- HEAVEN REJOICES.

THERE'S A GOSPEL SONG SUNG BY THE GAITHER BAND, WHICH EXPLAINS HEAVEN DOES NOT DELIGHT IN HUMAN ACHIEVEMENT HOWEVER USEFUL OR GRAND, BUT WHEN A LOST ONE IS FOUND AND BROUGHT HOME.

SOME OF THE WORDS OF THE SONG CALLED- "THAT'S WHEN THE ANGELS REJOICE" ARE:

"AT THE COMPLETION OF THE GOLDEN GATE, NO THE ANGELS DID NOT CELEBRATE. AND WHEN THE WRIGHT BOYS FLEW THEIR BIRD NO ANGELIC SHOUTS WERE HEARD...

NOW, WHEN THE LIGHT BULB FIRST LIT UP THE TOWN- NO, THE ANGELS DID NOT DANCE AROUND. AND WHEN THE MAN STEPPED ON THE MOON, THEY DIDN'T SING A VICTORY TUNE.

WHEN THE MODEL-T FIRST HIT THE STREET, IT DIDN'T BRING ALL HEAVEN TO ITS FEET. AND WHEN THE FIRST COMPUTER WAS BORN, THEY DIDN'T BLOW OLD GABRIEL'S HORN...

THERE'S ONLY ONE THING THAT WE'RE SURE ABOUT THAT CAN MAKE THOSE ANGELS JUMP AND SHOUT: IT'S WHEN A SINNER MAKES THE LORD HIS CHOICE; THAT'S WHEN THE ANGELS REJOICE."

SURELY, THE ANGELS ALSO REJOICE WHEN ONE WHO IS ALREADY SAVED REPENTS, TAKES THE SAVIOR'S HAND OF FORGIVENESS, AND IS BROUGHT BACK TO GOD AGAIN.

THEREFORE, LET US BE WISE AND HUMBLE ENOUGH TO HEAR AND ACCEPT THESE PARABLES ARE MEANT AS MUCH FOR YOU AND I AS THEY ARE FOR OTHER PEOPLE.

AFTER ALL, BEING SAVED DOES NOT MEAN WE NO LONGER NEED THE LORD, BUT RATHER WE HAVE BEGUN TO RECOGNIZE JUST HOW MUCH WE NEED AND DESIRE GOD'S PRESENCE AND LOVE. AMEN

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