

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, September 12, 2004
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-10
I Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you walk by our house some day, and hear a series of gigantic sneezes, you might suspect it's hay fever season and the pollen count is unusually high. Good guess. But the truth is I'm probably sitting on my back stoop, examining the contents of my filled-to-the-gills vacuum cleaner bag. As dirt and dust and who knows what else come wafting up out of the open bag, I can't help but sneeze, again and again.

It is a job I don't exactly relish doing. In fact, I wear rubber gloves, and try to keep my distance from the open bag, although I admit that is difficult since my arms are rather short. But I am a woman on a mission. I am searching for things I inadvertently sucked up into the vacuum.

This is not something I've always done. Believe me, I'm not that obsessive. It was with the advent of a toy called Legos in our home that I began to search the vacuum cleaner bag when it needs to be changed. See, as diligent as the children were in clean-up, it was inevitable that some Legos got missed along the way. But it only became evident when I vacuumed, when I heard the distinctive sound of something small but solid rattling through the beaters and sweepers and up the hose into the bag.

It could be almost anything. It could be one of those little yellow Lego heads—perhaps the head of a villain with the sneer on his face. It could be a helmet or hat or a Ninja mask. Why, it could be a Lego gold brick or a shining Lego jewel. I know Matthew has thousands of Legos, but you don't want the gold brick sucked up in the vacuum cleaner. You don't want to lose a single jewel.

Now, my son never **asked** me to examine the vacuum cleaner bag. **I** thought about doing it. **I** chose to tear it open on the back stoop and gingerly feel through the contents. It was **my** decision.

Maybe people think I'm crazy to look for lost objects in my vacuum cleaner bag. Then again, maybe folks thought that woman in Jesus' parable about the lost coin was a little off her rocker, too. It was only one coin, missing somewhere in her home. There were nine other coins remaining. What a waste of effort—lighting the lamp, sweeping the dust from every nook and cranny on the half chance the coin was there, maybe even getting down on hands and knees and feeling for the coin.

Some scholars, in their research of this text, like to point out the worth of the coin. They note that the coin had real value to it. It wasn't like a penny is today. (I see more and more people unwilling to pick up a dropped penny. Oh, they'll pick up quarters or bills but won't bother with a penny.) The coin in this parable was probably a drachma, a day's wages—nothing to sneeze at,

although the woman may indeed have sneezed as she swept the house looking for it. One scholar wrote that ten silver coins were a traditional bridal dowry in the Middle East at that time. The bride, in fact, wore a headdress containing the ten silver coins, and gave it to her new husband as part of that dowry. Frankly, I think emphasizing the worth of the coin misses the point of Jesus' story. The searching for and finding of the coin is the point of the story. Just look at the effort expended to find it. The woman lit a lamp—using up precious oil to light up the room's dark corners. She investigated every area of her home until she found the coin. Doesn't she need to get bread baked? Doesn't supper need prepared? What other chores did she set aside while she searched?

And then, when she finds the coin, she is so delighted, she up and throws a party to celebrate! How many drachmas are needed to party hearty with the neighbors?

No, I don't believe the intrinsic value of the coin is the point at all. Especially when you connect this parable with the one just before it—the parable of the lost sheep. There is an old gospel song about the shepherd leaving 99 sheep sheltered safely in the fold while he searches for the lost one, but that's **not** the way Jesus tells the story. Jesus says the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep out in the wilderness while he searches for the one that is lost. Leaves them in the midst of ravenous wild animals and treacherous terrain. He takes all this risk and expends all this energy and time for one lousy sheep. If the woman wasn't off her rocker, the shepherd was off his. Economically it makes no sense to search for one lost sheep when there are 99 remaining. If we were that shepherd we'd figure, okay, if the sheep finds its way back, well and good, but we won't go out and try to track the lost sheep down. It's on its own. Better to lose one, than lose the other 99.

And when the shepherd finds his lost sheep, he hoists it up on his shoulders, goes home, and calls together his friends to rejoice that what was lost was found. Like the woman when she found the coin, he celebrates. I doubt his fellow shepherds, or the woman's neighbors were all that excited about the sheep that was found or the coin that turned up. They probably just enjoyed the party. The shepherd and the woman, however, were **very** excited about what they found.

I get kind-of excited by what I find in my vacuum cleaner bag. Sometimes the bag yields a treasure trove! Five or six Lego pieces, two paper clips, a hair band, and a dime. Well, at least **I** consider it a treasure trove. But, to be honest, I have never found a Lego jewel or Ninja mask or gold brick. Mostly I find those dull gray Lego pieces, the Legos one can never easily spot on our carpet, the Legos that truly are a dime a dozen, the Legos Matthew probably wouldn't miss at all. But I like finding them, and I wash off the dust and dirt and wipe them clean and put them back in the Lego can. It's rather a satisfying victory for me.

Jesus told these parables in response to some folk who plainly thought he was off his rocker because he shared table fellowship with known sinners. He ate meals with outcasts and tax collectors. In fact, the grumblers grumbled, "He **welcomes** sinners . . ." These parables illustrate **why** Jesus welcomes tax collectors and sinners. He does so because God the Father does so. Like the shepherd searching for the missing sheep, and the woman seeking the missing coin, God wants to find the lost and restore them to their place at the table with him. He wants a real,

ongoing relationship with them. So like the shepherd and the woman, God will go to excessive lengths to retrieve that which is lost, and invite all to rejoice extravagantly with him when the lost is found. That's why, at the end of the lost sheep parable, Jesus says, ". . . there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." At the end of the lost coin parable, he says, ". . . there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." It is a most satisfying victory for God when he finds a person and brings them into his family. And he asks all to rejoice with him in that victory.

I had an e-mail from a friend in Florida this week. Deb volunteers with the Red Cross. Due to Hurricane Frances, she staffed one of Brevard County's 18 shelters from Thursday afternoon until Monday morning. The shelter housed approximately 450 people, providing meals and other support. Here is what Deb wrote to me:

The shelter experience is one I will never forget. It deserves to have a book written on it. In our shelter we had elderly people with special needs, some Alzheimer patients, some Attention Deficit Disorder children, a few so-called "juvenile delinquents", migrant workers, homeless people, four pregnant women, five patients in wheel chairs, and, in this case, a number of standard middle class retired "beach side" people. One man in our shelter kept urinating on the floor because he had a weak bladder. Everyone in the room was complaining about it and mad at us that it kept happening and blaming us for not fixing it. Finally, another person assigned to the room basically adopted him and took him to the bathroom regularly. After that there were no problems.

One man approached me about someone he thought was "suspicious." I promised I would keep an eye out. "Mr. Suspicious" was antisocial with his shelter mates. "Mr. Suspicious" was subject to panic attacks, so we made certain we talked to him to calm him down. After the storm, "Mr. Suspicious" came to us Red Cross staff persons and thanked us for how much we had helped him. Then the man who was initially concerned about "Mr. Suspicious" sought us out and let us know he realized he had judged the man wrongly.

The variety of people gathered into that Brevard County shelter are no different from those gathered around Jesus in our Gospel lesson. They are no different from those gathered here as the Church. Now the question becomes, who **are** we? Are we the 99 righteous who believe they need no repentance? Are we the Pharisees who grumble that Jesus hangs around with suspicious characters, known sinners? Do we act as judge and jury for those around us who seek the shelter of God? Are we quick to criticize and question God's welcoming someone, or for that matter **anyone** who desires a new and deep relationship with Him? Yes, we are all of that. And yet, at the same time, we are also the lost sheep, the missing coin ourselves.

Not one of us is a Lego jewel. You and I—we're the little, ordinary gray pieces, dusty and dirty, petty and pretentious, sinful and selfish, troubled and broken. But God keeps seeking us out, searching for us, and when he finds us, he takes us in his arms, washes off our grime through his forgiveness, and, rejoicing, brings us into his family where we belong. **AMEN.**

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