

Luke 15:1-10

Would you please pray with me? Gracious God, guard and guide the words on my lips, use them to deliver your gospel to the hearts and minds of your people. Amen.

As today's text opens, Jesus is described in a scene that is, in some ways, the opposite of the dinner at the Pharisee's house we heard about two weeks ago, and in other ways it is the very model of what he proposed for who to include at table fellowship. Still traveling onward to Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus' message has been attracting a certain kind of people, the kind of people not particularly appealing to the religious leaders of the day. The Pharisees are noted to be grumbling about the people who are surrounding Jesus to hear his teaching, thus the marginalized are aptly nudging the Pharisees toward the unfamiliar and uncomfortable margin. Their grumbling is nothing new. Nor is their disapproval of the company Jesus keeps. Since the calling of the first disciples, Jesus already had a reputation for associating with tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees grumbled then, and they are grumbling now. Rather than address their grumbling directly, Jesus couches his comeback in the pair of parables we have presented today.

Losing things. It happens to all of us. Lose some pocket change in our couch or car seat, we're not apt to be very upset, let alone notice. Lose a diamond ring down a drain, or lose a winning lottery ticket...now THAT'S a bit of a different story...maybe. When our kids lose things, we may point out how careless they are and the need to be more careful. When we can't find the car keys and we're going to be late for work, we begin to panic, and the same wisdom we dispense to our children is typically not well received.

Regardless of what we have lost and the circumstances of how we lost it, we can usually chalk it up to absent-mindedness or carelessness...well, I'm sure you can fill in your own excuses. Losing something is frustrating. How upset we get about the item lost is a matter of personal perspective and value of the item. This sense of value is also proportional to the amount of time and effort we're willing to spend on searching for the lost item. Ultimately, the longer the search yields no result, we stop searching, surrender the hope of finding and return to the routines of our lives. We are willing to swallow "acceptable losses."

In the two parables Jesus offers, one right after the other with no chance for his listeners to consider the implications, we are presented with a man and a woman who aren't willing to accept a loss. For no other reason than his flock was noticeably incomplete, the shepherd sets out to correct the situation and restore the flock to wholeness. The shepherd understood the sheep did not have the capacity to find its own way back to him, and rather than shrug it off and keep a closer eye on the remaining 99, he sets off in pursuit. One scholar notes, "When a sheep has strayed from the flock, it usually lies down helplessly, and will not move, stand up, or run."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*.

Once found, the shepherd has no choice but to carry it back, breathless from exertion and excitement.

Then, we have the woman. Losing 1 of 10 silver coins may seem more significant. She has lost 10% of what she had vs. the shepherd's 1%. While not insignificant in value, (each silver coin was worth a day's wages), this did not represent the woman's life savings or total net worth. Yet, she took great pains in her search. Although she didn't have nearly the range of space to cover as the shepherd, she used broom and lamp, making absolutely certain no amount clutter or shadow would get in her way of even the faintest twinkling, revealing the coin's location. She would carefully look in every nook and cranny to recover what she had lost.

In both cases, the situations are described identically. Neither the sheep nor the coin is of any greater value than the original whole. They are sought simply because they are lost, and the whole is no longer complete. So delighted by this restoration, they respond in exactly the same way – by calling friends and neighbors, those whom they know well, and those who are just acquaintances, and asking them to share the joy. Who would grumble in the face of such rejoicing? Honestly, we would.

I'm sure we all like a celebration every now and then, but if our friends and neighbors start calling us to rejoice with them every time they find the hedge clippers, a nail file or a favorite CD, that's been missing, we're going to be a little bothered. But Jesus says, "There is joy in heaven and in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." With these two short episodes, Jesus has managed to offend and embrace those in his listening audience.

To those who would interpret God as the seeker in the stories, Jesus has likened God, and his listeners, to the lowest of the low, shepherds and women, and is drawing the wrong type of people into the mix. Thus, they grumble. To those who would hear the life changing hope of their inclusion and restoration to the community, Jesus has granted them a glimpse of God's grace. Even for Luke's audience, social boundaries needed to be addressed.

So what does this mean for us, today? Commentator Gary Peluso-Verdend writes, "*We might wonder who were the people in Luke's congregation who refused to rejoice when sinners were welcomed. We might also imagine the ways that congregations today continue to be scandalized by this God who sends our leaders out as shepherds and women in search of the lost and who brings sinners to our doors. Do we rejoice or grumble?*"<sup>2</sup>

With the variety of mission and ministry we engage in here at Trinity, it is easy to see that we are working to be like those tireless seekers in the text, not willing to be satisfied that someone might be missing from our community and fellowship. From my very first week here, I couldn't help but be struck by the words on the front of the Trinity Today bulletin insert, "Its no accident that you are here...God has brought you here and wants to touch your life." If we are to claim that all are welcome, then we must fully accept the depth and breadth of what we intend by "all." In order for us to reach people, we must recognize that we, too, were once lost and needed God to seek

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<sup>2</sup> Gary E. Peluso-Verdend, *New Proclamation – Easter through Pentecost*, 2007.

us out and draw us near. We may have been part of the 99 righteous that thought we had no need for repentance. We may not have even known we were lost at the time. We are drawn together by the searching of God, through the stirring of the Holy Spirit, for the promise and hope that we claim in Jesus the Christ.

In October, 2007, Art Ross offered this insight on this passage:

*This passage offers prophetic hope to a grumbling world. Hatred among people of differing faiths, armed conflict among nations of the world, and polarizations within our nation and our Christian denominations create much grumbling, grumbling that leads to alienation, including the most extreme form of alienation: war. Sometimes wars are fought with weapons that kill, other times wars are fought with words and attitudes that demean and diminish human life. Jesus comes to us; he calls unto himself all those who will listen to his teachings, whether those people are like us or not.*

*Every person who hears these words of Jesus and responds with repentance causes God to rejoice. Repentance leads to a life of faith marked by attributes such as those the shepherd and the woman embodied: love for the lost; persistent pursuit of the well being of others; joyful, generous friendship; and sharing with one's friends and neighbors.<sup>3</sup>*

In the news, events and anniversaries of the last several days, Mr. Ross' comments bear possibly more weight than even he could have imagined. Our repentance is not our turning back toward God, and it cannot come about simply by demanding it. Rather, our repentance is our turning back toward each other in response our encounter with the God who comes down, tirelessly searches for us, and brings us back to wholeness and restoration, within ourselves and within our community of faith in a truly amazing display of abundant grace. God's grace is amazing when we see how it saved a wretch like me. But do we find it equally amazing that God's amazing grace would dare to save a wretch like you, or the ex-con, or the homeless beggar, or the recovering addict, or the abuser?

We can choose to grumble or we can choose to rejoice. If we choose to grumble, we are as lost as the sheep or the coin. Our only hope is to be found again, returned to the whole. If we choose to rejoice, we add our voices with the angels in the presence of God. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Art Ross, *Interpretation*, October, 2007