

Proper 19, Year C
Luke 15: 1-10

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

Looking for the Lost:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Have you ever listened to teenager describe a date or a party or an embarrassing moment or a monumental achievement? Maybe you've described such things yourself.

Do you remember starting your story with, "It was like...." or "It was as if...." Maybe someone says to you, "Tell me about it" and you reply, "Well it was like..." and then you go on with your description. You draw a comparison for that is often the only way you can make an experience clear for someone else.

For Jesus, parables served such a function. Sometimes Jesus used parables to teach people what the reign of God was like. Sometimes Jesus used parables to teach people what God was like. And sometimes his parables did a little of both. I can imagine people listened intently to every word he spoke. I bet he had a great way of telling a story.

I bet he thought about his audience as he figured out how to tell the story – their hopes, their fears, where they lived, what they did, what grieved their hearts, what gave them joy. I bet he found ways to connect with them in language and metaphors that would touch their very hearts. I bet he made every detail count.

One day, on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus stops to address the crowd that followed him everywhere. What a crowd it was – women, children, tax-collectors, sinners, itinerant workers and, at the edge of the crowd the curious ones – Pharisees, scribes, maybe even a centurion or two. Jesus hears some mumbling. Pharisees and scribes grumbling to one another, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

To all of them – the women, the children, the tax-collectors, the sinners, the Pharisees and the scribes, Jesus tells a parable. Actually he begins with a question – “Which 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?”

Stop and think about that question. What an odd question it is. It presumes an answer – an answer that runs counter to good judgment. It assumes that they would all leave the ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness where those sheep might well be prey to wild boars, mountain lions, and even rustlers, bandits and thieves.

What right-minded shepherd would risk a flock for a sheep. “Which 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?” How would you answer that question?

I can imagine a long silence followed that question. I can imagine people picturing the search over rocky and wooded terrain, calculating how long it would take to search all the crevices and gulleys. I can imagine people calculating the risk and coming up with the answer, “No way.”

But yet Jesus goes on with the story. He tells of how the shepherd carries that lost sheep home on his shoulders, how he calls his friends and neighbors to a party celebrating NOT that the flock was still intact but rather that the lost sheep was found.

Why, why tell the story thusly to folks who had a very clear idea of the risks shepherding entailed?

And what of the woman who has lost a silver coin, a drachma, two days wages most likely. Jesus tells us she lights a lamp – she uses up expensive oil in her search for that coin – she sweeps the house until she finds it. Imagine how hard she worked to find a lost coin. Why, why not just wait until it turns up on its own?

Hear how Jesus finishes the story. He tells of her calling together her friends and neighbors to help her celebrate finding a lost coin. The celebration probably cost more than the coin that was lost.

Surely those within earshot would have spotted the incongruities of these stories.

But I wonder if it isn't in the incongruities that these parables have their deepest meaning.

Let's take a closer look.

How important is that lost sheep to the shepherd? Could it be that his well-being, his livelihood depends on him bringing all the sheep back into the sheep-fold? Shepherds, after all, were hired hands, entrusted with the sheep. A lone sheep was far more vulnerable than a flock huddled together. Losing a sheep could mean losing a job. Perhaps that shepherd had no real choice. He had to go after that lost sheep. It was essential to his survival.

And what about the woman, the woman who lost the silver coin. How important was that coin to her – living as she did in a windowless house with a hard-packed dirt floor. Living as she did at the edge of poverty. I bet that coin was ten per cent of her net worth. They say a drachma like that silver coin lost on the floor would buy two days worth of food. How precious that coin was to her. No wonder she searched so furiously for it. No wonder she turned her house upside down. She needed that coin to assure her survival.

Could it be, is it possible that Jesus is saying that God is like a poor woman searching furiously for a single lost coin? Could it be that Jesus is saying that God is like a shepherd risking the flock for a single lost sheep? Could it be that Jesus is saying that for God's joy to be complete the lost must be found?

Think of it – for God's joy to be complete the lost must be found again and again and again. And we are all lost probably more times

and in more ways than we would like to admit. But God will not stop the search for us.

That's how important we all are to God – Pharisees and tax collectors, sinners and scribes, soldiers and refugees, people on all sides of every conflict, workers and CEO's, contractors and carpenters, people on the west side of Sonoma and people on the east side, people we like and people we like to avoid.

It's like a mosaic – all the little pieces, all the parts made in God's image, need to be there.

Like the shepherd who needs the sheep, like the woman who needs the coin, God needs each of us for God's joy to be complete.

For there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

Think of it – each time we turn and return to God we multiply the joy in heaven.

Our lives are lived in the season of turning – turning to the One whose joy is completed by us. Amen.