

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 15/9/2019

Jeremiah 4:11-12,22-28
Psalm 14
1 Timothy 1:1-2,12-19a
Luke 15:1-10

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

The three Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, share much material in common, with around 85% of the content of these Gospels being found in at least two of the Gospels, if not being common to all three. It is a source of great interest and delight, then, for some theologians when a particular story or event is unique - is found in only one of the Gospel stories. It leads to questions like “why did that particular Gospel writer include that event?” “What’s that parable trying to tell us about the community for which this Gospel was written?”

Today, we hear two short parables - the wayward sheep and the lost coin. It is followed (although we don’t read it today) by the parable of the Prodigal Son - the third of the things that were lost. Although the parable of the wayward sheep is told in Matthew’s Gospel too, it is different in content and nature. But the lost coin and the Prodigal Son are unique to Luke’s Gospel - if we didn’t have Luke’s Gospel we wouldn’t know these parables at all.

On the face of it, the message of these parables is simple - by God’s Grace, what is lost can be found, or in the case of the Prodigal Son, what has wandered away can be brought home. But the opening verses of the chapter actually give us a wider context and understanding for what follows:

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable...” (Luke 15:1-3a)

The stories that follow, including the two that make up our Gospel passage today, are told in direct response to these fearful and self-righteous religious leaders who are not happy with the way Jesus is breaking rules and charting a new course. They're grumbling because Jesus has drawn the circle of acceptability much wider to include (perish the thought!) sinners.

Both the shepherd and the woman connote figures from the underside of Jewish society. Shepherds had notorious reputations and were generally avoided as outcasts. Women were treated as second-class citizens. The mere choice of these two as images for God must have caused a shock among the listeners, and especially among those who grumbled because Jesus was welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners.

In typical Jesus fashion he holds a parabolic mirror up to their discontent to show how differently God views such people - and how God's desire is restoration; restoration to one's rightful place; restoration to community; restoration to family; joy in sinners restored to the community of faith.

Jesus places a high value on human life and on relationships. Everyone has worth and everyone matters, especially those most ignored and marginalized by the "in-crowd." Gentiles and sinners and women, goodness me! It's time for a pair of parables to challenge the mindset and assumptions of the grumblers.

The first parable concerns the one sheep out of the hundred that is lost and soon found by the persistent shepherd. Jesus' teaching is that no life is beyond God's grace and love, and that the Divine Shepherd will seek out even the most recalcitrant wanderer.

The second parable tells the story of a woman who has ten silver coins, loses one, searches diligently, finds it, and gathers her friends and neighbors to rejoice in her good fortune. Again, no one is outside of God's grace-full reach, Jesus says.

God, the stories say, will bring home confused and rebellious creatures. Such searching gives value to those being sought. They become treasured and significant because they are not left for lost but are made the objects of divine concern. We, my friends, are those objects of divine concern...

The second striking image of these parables is that of heaven's delight in the recovery of the lost. So overcome are the shepherd and the woman with the success of their search that they call their friends and neighbors to come for a party. Neither wants to celebrate their good fortune alone.

As commentators note, the expense of the celebration may have been more than the value of either the sheep or the coin, but that possibility only adds to the extravagance and joy of the occasion.

It is an unusual picture of God—throwing a celestial party. And while it is true that the Gospel writer makes a point of speaking of heaven's joy “over one sinner who repents”, the stories are not primarily calls to repentance. After all, sheep and coins can't repent. The image of a merciful and joyful God completely overshadows any interest in the behavior or remorse of the lost creatures.

Luke's Gospel, written around the year 80CE is speaking to a community of early Christians who face opposition and persecution all around them - opposition from the Jewish Leaders, particularly directed to those followers of Christ's Way who were formerly Jews; opposition from family members who didn't understand this new form of religion; and persecution from the occupying Roman Empire, who saw this new faith as teaching dangerous principles of justice and equality.

For these early Christians in Luke's community, then, they needed more than ever to hear the stories of Christ which reminded them of their worth and their purpose, even as they faced such opposition.

They needed to hear the message that no one is beyond the reach of God's love and grace. All are invited to the table and into Christ's beloved body.

No one is so lost that they cannot be found. God remembers and is faithful to divine promise—even when tested and tried.

Luke's Gospel is also about discipleship, and maturing in Christian service. So it makes sense that parables such as the ones we hear today were included in Luke's writings - because the community needed to be reminded that God does not give up on us when we fall short of the bar of discipleship. God will not walk away from us and abandon us when we forget our baptismal promises and go our own way.

God has promised that we are worth more than that; that like the 1 sheep out of 100, or the simple coin that might roll under the couch and be forgotten, God will exhaust all efforts to bring us back. God will not rest until we are brought out of wherever we are trapped; carried lovingly back, and the eyes of all in heaven will well up with tears; tears of joy that the lost has been found, and been returned home.

Let us pray...

Undaunted you seek the lost, O God,
exultant you bring home the found:
touch our hearts with grateful wonder
at the tenderness of your forbearing love
grant us delight in the mercy that has found us;
and bring all to rejoice at the feast of forgiven sinners.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever. **Amen**

Amen