

“God’s Party Time”

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one 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 until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Melissa Early, a United Methodist Pastor in Arlington Heights, Illinois, told the following story:

When I pulled into the church parking lot I noticed the mom, dad, and 13-year-old daughter of the family next door walking slowly in the middle of the street.

They paused to peek into side yards and bent down to look under bushes. Two people I presumed were neighbors joined them in scanning the neighborhood.

I assumed their dog Cane, the 30-pound bundle of tightly wound energy that is my dog’s occasional playmate, had burst through their invisible fence to chase a rabbit or squirrel. I started across the street to offer my help in finding the wayward pet—and then stopped when the dad rang the doorbell of a nearby home. He went inside and soon came out with their 8-year-old daughter in tow.

“She was in there?!?” the mom yelled. “Your sister was so worried about you!” It wasn’t just the other daughter who was afraid. I could hear the residual terror in the mom’s voice. The last ten minutes had been a living nightmare. “Don’t you ever do that again!” She stuck her finger in her daughter’s face.¹

¹ Melissa Early, *Losing and Being Lost*, The Christian Century, September 13, 2019

This wasn't the simple joy that is described in the stories of the lost sheep and missing coin. It's complicated to lose things.

For example, when I lose something—my keys, my credit card, my cell phone — I am full of self-recrimination and regret. *I should have been more careful*, I tell myself. *If I were more organized, not as lazy, and basically a better person, this wouldn't have happened.* I'm usually right (at least about being more organized and less lazy). If I always put things back where they belong they wouldn't get lost.

I think this is interesting because in Luke 15:1-10, Jesus and those around him are fully engaged in this struggle to let go of notions of regret and *join the human party*. The stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, along with the one about the lost son which follows, constitute Luke's "*party chapter*."

It begins with Luke's commentary on the *social tension* that is developing in this part of Jesus' ministry.

You see, Jesus has already attracted the religious folks, the Pharisees and the scholars, but now tax collectors and sinners are coming in numbers that are disconcerting to the traditional religious folks, who begin to murmur among themselves (never a positive sign in Luke-Acts). They talk about the *riffraff* who are hanging around Jesus, and the fact that Jesus is not sufficiently aware of the difference in status between the various groups of his hangers-on.

As Luke sets it up, Jesus tells the three stories in direct response to this murmuring.

In fact, the texts for this Sunday—about the lost sheep and the lost coin—are stories to which *most* of us can relate. Whether the two situations are totally realistic is *not* the point; *the point is that whether or not we would actually leave 99 sheep to go look for one, or turn a house upside down in search of a single coin, all of us have experienced a crisis that abruptly turns our attention from the macrocosm to the microcosm.* When such a crisis occurs, a normal human reaction is to shift focus, marshal all resources and apply every effort to solving the problem.

We leave 99 sheep to fend for themselves. We leave nine coins to gather dust. *Whether it makes sense or not, whether it is for the common good or not, we abandon our sense of the whole. We abandon our perspective on the big picture in order to give our intelligence and passion to the crisis at hand.* The universality of such experience and response is underscored by the questions with which Jesus begins each of his illustrations:

What man of you . . . ? What woman of you . . . ? Would not any human being act in much the same way, Jesus asks. Both searches are successful. The shepherd finds his lost sheep; the housewife finds her lost coin.

The surprise component of these parables is neither the loss itself nor the diligent search.

Thus far, both actors are behaving in normal, everyday ways in this universal human experience of the crisis of loss.

But the next action they take is *by no means ordinary*. Normal actions involve *relief, repentance and remediation*. We castigate ourselves for our stupidity. We vow relentlessly that we will never allow *that* to happen again. We may share our joy with the immediate family, but rarely would we throw a party for the neighbors—partly, no doubt, because we hate to admit the reasons for the crisis in the first place.

No, most of our energy goes into taking whatever steps are necessary to shore up the security of the enterprise. We are just glad that the worst has not happened this time and that we can move on with our lives.

The shepherd and the housewife, however, behave differently. With *abandon* they gather friends and neighbors and invite them to help celebrate the successful searches. *Does the shepherd serve roast mutton to his guests? Does the housewife spend her nine coins on refreshments?* The mood is *extravagant, abundant and generous*. The occasion is unambiguously designated as *party time!*

The lostness of the human community is just such a crisis for God, Jesus is saying. God's passion is bent toward the service of the lost; God's mercy is reckless and profligate.

It is a *prodigal* passion, and our visions of salvation are *measly* by comparison. God's party time is by no means limited to the salvation of souls—it is the *whole person, body and soul*, who goes partying.

Nor is God's party time limited to a certain class of people.

From Luke's perspective, the interesting question is *who* the lost are. *Are they the tax collectors, the sinners? Or are they the Pharisees, scholars?* As 1 Timothy 2 puts it, "*The grace of our Lord overflowed.*" In the end, *all* are invited to the party; *all* are invited to join the dance.²

[Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded*, quote, p. 272]:

Friends, Jesus is comparing himself to the *shepherd* and the *woman*. Instead of *grumbling* about the people he hangs out with, he suggests, the Pharisees should come to the party to celebrate their return.

When I put myself in the same role that Jesus does, that of searching shepherd and seeking woman, I feel bad that I lost something in the first place.

But I get unstuck when I remember that I am also the lost sheep and the misplaced coin. *I have been sought and found. (As have you!).*

² Mary Scherts, *God's Party Time*, The Christian Century, September 4, 2007