

## **“THE FOUND SHEEP AND FOUND COIN”**

Luke 15:1-10

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A certain shepherd had 100 sheep in his care. Every morning he would take the sheep out on the hills to feed on the grasses there. And every evening he would bring them back in to the fenced enclosure that kept them safe from the predators of the night. There was one sheep who loved being in the hills so much that she was always the last sheep through the gate in the evening.

The shepherd had grown very fond of this sheep, and each night, with a smile, would say to her as she passed through the gate, “Welcome home, my wayward one.” One evening, he counted 99 sheep as they passed through the gate, but his wayward one was nowhere to be seen. So he closed the gate, making sure it was secure before going in search of his much loved lost sheep.

I am sure that I am not the only one who has been troubled by Jesus’ version of this parable where the shepherd leaves the 99 in the wilderness while he goes in search of the lost sheep. Perhaps it bothers you even more in this time when our focus is directed to “being safe.” It would be easy to look down on those who are not observing the protocols set up to prevent the spread of this virus. Whether from carelessness or a defiant assertion of their rights, some of these folk have transmitted the virus to others. I find myself becoming angry at those who minimize the seriousness of our circumstances and encourage others to join them in their selfish assertions. Whatever happened to love of neighbor and putting the welfare of the community over personal interest?

I like to think about this as a little righteous indignation, but I know that it would be easy to cross over the line into self-righteousness. The Pharisees and Scribes are complaining that Jesus is eating with sinners. They are not any less offended after Jesus tells this parable. Like us, they question the shepherd’s wisdom in leaving the 99 to go in search of the one. Shouldn’t Jesus be spending more time in the synagogue, sharing his insights into scripture, teaching those who are already walking in the faith? Couldn’t he have spent more time building up the faith rather than tearing it down? What kind of sense does it make to put the 99 at risk for the sake of the one?

Why does Jesus tell the parable this way? Well, for starters, the 99 are right where they are supposed to be. The wilderness is the place of encounter with God. Whether we’re talking about Israel literally wandering in the wilderness after being led out of slavery or the wilderness that came later with occupation from a foreign power, this is the place of greatest growth. In the wilderness, the people received instruction on the best way to love God and live in community through the gift of the Ten Commandments. In the

wilderness of captivity in Babylon, the synagogue became a structure for deepening faith that exists to the present day. The wilderness in the parable is the place where the sheep are well-fed and the place where they gather together as one flock.

Belonging to the people of God does not exempt us from danger and risk. The people of God do not belong in some kind of enclosure that keeps the danger out. This is what the Pharisees have been trying to do: build a fence around the people. They are not wilderness wanderers, but city planners trying to define every space in the lives of God's people.

So one thing the religious leadership was doing in Jesus' day was trying to domesticate the wilderness. They were working hand-in-glove with Rome to keep the peace and to secure Rome's control in the territory. In doing so, faith became more about obedience to a set of rules and less about doing the work of God in the world. In one sense, we shouldn't confuse the Pharisees with the sheep in the wilderness. They are by Jesus' standards self-righteous, not righteous. Many churching people today are not any better at telling the difference.

The pandemic is of course not a good thing, but it presents the church with an opportunity to recognize that our "civilized" society and faith is in fact a wilderness. We worship (usually) in a sanctuary, a safe place, and yet it is in fact not a safe place today. Do we need to rethink the place and importance of our buildings for the nurturing of faith? We are unable to gather in the ways we used to gather. We've had to rethink how to "be together," how to continue mission, and how to connect to movements for justice. Being in this unfamiliar place pushes us to pay attention to what God might be doing in our world today. It isn't too much to say that the church is "at risk" in these days, which is right where we belong: on the edge, always looking for new ways to be church, always attentive to the leading of God in an "unsafe" world.

The fact that the righteous sheep understand that their sacred place is a wilderness, that this is precisely the place to encounter God, and that our strength lies in this community where we are fed together is not however the main thrust of these parables. Nor is the emphasis on the lost sheep and the lost coin as we commonly call these parables. The joy of the kingdom of God is in the finding.

She had ten coins and lost one. She might have chosen to be happy with the nine. A lot of people would have just accepted the lost. We lose more than a day's wages out of every ten to taxes, to a leisure activity, to the cable bill, to a day at the ballpark. But this woman is distraught at the loss of a tenth. She puts everything she has into finding it.

It's not that she doesn't value the other nine coins. There could be no tenth without them. Just as there would be no 100<sup>th</sup> sheep without the other 99. The nine and the ninety-nine are right where they belong. They are in a good place and there is much joy in that

place, in the company of God's people. As the father said to his elder son in the next parable, "All that I have is yours!"

But the shepherd, the woman, and God know that the flock is not complete, that a coin is missing, and that a child is lost. No effort is spared to restore the sheep, to redeem the coin, and to welcome the child. Like the merchant who upon finding a pearl of great worth sells all that he has to purchase it. Like God perhaps our hearts should be for lost things and our greatest joy comes in finding them.

Every day, it seems, we are feeling a new loss. We miss meals out, an evening at the theatre, a live performance, a gathering of a larger group of friends. Churches are missing the opportunity to welcome their new pastor. The danger in a pandemic is to focus on these losses and lose sight of the lost: those without a home, those who are grieving, those suffering from depression, those who are rejected because of the color of their skin or their sexual orientation, or gender identity. The heart of God is for the lost. We see in Jesus one who shares in the suffering of the oppressed, one who experiences the rejection of the world and is in solidarity with its outcasts. But he does so not in despair, but with hope. He eats with sinners not because these are his kind of people, but because he sees them as children of God looking for redemption and restoration.

We are all God's people and though we cannot escape the wilderness, we can come together and listen to God's leading. We discover our greatest joy in the finding. Faithful living is a found living as we discover the presence and love of God in unexpected places.

In March and April, several people talked about experiencing spiritual renewal in the midst of their isolation. Parents are building deeper and richer relationships with their children. We are using technology to connect in more meaningful ways than before. People are joining us in worship who didn't or couldn't before.

So yeah, it feels like we're in a bit of a wilderness right now. The sheep has wandered off into some ravine, and the coin is buried still in the couch. Jesus eats with sinners, because this is not acceptable to him. For the Pharisees, though, it had become business as usual.

For too many in the church today, we are about cutting our losses. This is not the good news preached by Jesus who sought and saved the lost, whose joy was and is made complete in the finding. The parables of the found sheep and the found coin tell us to not grow weary in looking, for there will be great joy not just for us but in heaven, especially in finding and restoring that which was lost. Amen.,