

Sermon Luke 15: 1-10 September 11, 2016

By this time a lot of men and women of doubtful reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religion scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, "He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends." Their grumbling triggered this story. Jesus said, "Suppose one of you had a hundred sheep and lost one. Wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the lost one until you found it? When found, you can be sure you would put it across your shoulders, rejoicing, and when you got home call in your friends and neighbors, saying, 'Celebrate with me! I've found my lost sheep!' Count on it - there's more joy in heaven over one sinner's rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue. Or imagine a woman who has ten coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and scour the house, looking in every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it you can be sure she'll call her friends and neighbors: 'Celebrate with me! I found my lost coin!' Count on it - that's the kind of party God's angels throw every time one lost soul turns to God." Luke 15: 1-10 *The Message translation*

What is the most valuable thing you own... the thing you can't imagine losing in an earthquake or a fire? This isn't about people but things... a thing you'd be lost without. I asked myself that question yesterday and realized that it's my cell phone. I make and receive calls and texts and emails on my phone. I use it as a camera and a calendar and notebook. I keep up with my kids and my friends. I can't imagine losing my phone. What can you not imagine losing? It might be (unlike my phone) something sentimental, or it might be something you rely on.

I'd like us to sing: I'll sing a line of this song and then we'll sing it together. You already know the words so it's just the tune that might be

unfamiliar. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me... I once was lost but now am found, was blind by now I see... Alleluia! Grace like rain falls down on me... Alleluia! All my stains are washed away, they’re washed away. (and again) Alleluia! Grace like rain falls down on me. Alleluia! All my stains are washed away, they’re washed away.

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved... How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed... Alleluia! Grace like rain falls down on me... Alleluia! All my stains are washed away, they’re washed away. (once more) Alleluia! Grace like rain falls down on me. Alleluia! All my stains are washed away... they’re washed away.”

We just sang about being lost and about amazing grace. It’s what Jesus was talking about with the Pharisees and Scribes: being lost and amazing grace. I’ve asked you to think about something you’d be “lost” without. Can you also identify something about yourself that’s most valuable to you, that you can’t imagine yourself without? Is it your humor? Your intelligence? Your good looks? Something you excel at and take pride in? Because this is also something in Jesus’ story. Jesus told the Pharisees and Scribes (the religious insiders) a parable - a story with layers of meaning - about being lost and found, about being lost and found and amazed.

Luke starts this story by telling us about a crowd of disreputable people, people who were known to be cheaters, sinners, and unclean (which doesn't translate well into our culture... to be unclean made a person unfit to worship, even unable to enter into the worshiping community, impure and unholy. "Those kind of people" (sinners and the unclean) were surrounding Jesus to listen to Him, to be near Him, to touch Him. Word must have gotten around about His compassion, His healing, and His willingness to touch and heal the sick, the diseased, even the dead. This made Jesus unclean as well as them. "Those kind of people" (sinners and the unclean) were pushing their way to the front of the crowd, to be near Jesus, trying to find a place near Him. The Pharisees and Scribes were also there, listening to Jesus, hoping to catch Him in some blasphemy, hoping to trip Him up with a religious question He couldn't answer. They grumbled - loud enough for Jesus to hear - that Jesus welcomed sinners - He seemed to seek them out! and He even ate with them. This story Jesus told is for religious insiders... and that could include us.

Jesus' story was about two things... a lamb, a living thing, and a coin, an inanimate thing, both lost, and both unable to help themselves be found. The idea of God seeking out the helpless might not have sat well

with the Pharisees, who were strict upholders of the Mosaic Law, for whom ritual, and behavior, and even health, symbolized holiness and nearness to God. It might not sit well with us either, at least culturally, because we in America believe that pulling yourself up by your bootstraps symbolizes your worthiness.

Jesus, however, never cared if He rubbed people the wrong way because He was busy pointing to the right way to live... a heart in love with God and hands in service to others.

Jesus told about a shepherd who left the ninety-nine accounted-for sheep, and went in search of one that was lost. Everyone in the crowd around Jesus knew the value of a sheep, and the cost to a shepherd of losing a sheep. They also knew that sheep can be frightened dumb, unable to make noise, and that a sheep that falls into a crevasse, or hides in the bushes from a predator, won't be seen or heard and will soon die. So a lost sheep is completely helpless and dependent on the shepherd to search it out. Jesus hoped His listeners would make the connection: that God is a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep who are safe, and hunts relentlessly for (humanity) the lost sheep.

Jesus then told His listeners about a precious coin (probably a drachma, and worth the price of an entire sheep or a quarter of an ox) that

was lost, and of great value to a woman. This coin was a significant loss and the woman turned her house upside down looking for it. She swept every corner, lifted up every sofa cushion, went through the papers on her desk, through every trash can, unwilling to stop looking until she found this valuable coin. The coin, like the sheep, was unable to move itself into her line of sight, unable to make a sound, unable to help itself be found. The coin was helpless, dependent on the woman seeking it out. Jesus, again, hoped His listeners would make the connection: God is a woman, who searches persistently and tirelessly for (humanity) the valuable lost coin.

Let's go back to what you highly value about yourself, what you would feel lost without. Good health. A keen mind. A beautiful voice. Unflagging faith. Being a good judge of character. Naturally curly hair. Jesus told stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin to the Pharisees and Scribes, who held their religion dear... their purity and holiness more valuable to them than other people... maybe more highly valued to them than God. We too can be lost (and not know it) when we prize something about ourselves, above God's love for us, and God's command that we love all others.

Jesus said that when a shepherd finds a lost sheep, or a woman finds a lost coin, they're wild with joy and relief, and invite their neighbors to a party, to celebrate. This is what it's like in heaven, He said, when a sinner

repents... when the lost let ourselves be found by the God who is actively searching for us.

It seems at first glance or first hearing that Jesus' story is about those in the crowd who were obviously lost... the sinners, the tax collectors, the unclean, the diseased, the poor, women, and even children. But those people already knew, from their status, that they were lost. It was the Pharisees and Scribes, the righteous and religious, whom Jesus saw as lost. They valued something (even something good like maintaining God's Laws) that had become *more* important to them than what's *most* important to God... that we passionately love God and sacrificially love others. I imagine the righteous and upright in the crowd around Jesus saying to themselves, "We just can't get it right with this Jesus! He always finds fault... with *us!*" (That is, if they were willing to see themselves in the story, among the lost.)

The "obviously" lost in the crowd found amazing grace in Jesus' story, in His kindness and compassion, His radical and inclusive acceptance. Amazing grace: it's God's favor and God's lovingkindness towards us, God's partiality to us, God's sweet and tender love for us. If you're not lost... then you can't be found by God's amazing grace. But if you are lost (if you know yourself to be lost - and all of us are lost: sinners, broken, and

in need of mending and healing and redemption) if you are lost then, and only then, can you be found by grace, by God's amazing grace. *Alleluia! Grace like rain falls down on me. Alleluia! All my stains are washed away, they're washed away.*

There's a prayer in the funeral service, in the United Methodist Book of Worship, that I love, and whenever I pray it, it speaks deeply to me. It's a prayer of committal, and of surrender. "Into Your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend Your servant. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech You, a sheep of Your own fold, a lamb of Your own flock, a sinner of Your own redeeming." This is a prayer that we can pray for ourselves, and for each other as religious insiders (which the Pharisees and Scribes were) to remind us that we - all people on earth - can get lost and in need of God's amazing grace. Let us pray: *Thank You, Jesus, for getting to the heart of the matter, for teaching us that when we think we have it all (and so we don't need You) we are, in fact, among the lost. Thank You that You never stop searching for us... and that even if it takes our entire lifetime, You are committed to finding us. Thank You for being one of us, and telling stories, and using the things of earth, things that we know about... bread and wine, dirt and spit, sheep and coins... to teach us about the mysteries of God, and about amazing grace. May hearing Your stories today, Lord, bring us*

*closer to You, and to each other... and to all humanity... this world that You
so love. We pray this in Your name. Amen.*