

## **“Summer of Parables: Lost Sheep and Lost Coin”**

*Luke 15:1-10*

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Do you ever lose things? What would be the most important thing that you have lost? About ten years ago we lost two of our kids. We were camping on a beautiful mountain in Cape Breton. We asked two of the kids to take our dog for a little walk before supper. Our dog Finnigan hated walks so we were surprised when supper was ready and they weren't back. We set about the campground to find them, but came up empty. We started asking various campers if they'd seen them. One couple remembered them and pointed to one of the overgrown hiking trails that led into the woods. We started to panic. The worst things go through your head.

We notified the Park office and a search was begun. Campers helped us check the various trails. Two officers from Natural Resources arrived to organize a search. Soon the RCMP called and also joined the search. With night approaching, it was distressing to think of our two kids spending the night in the woods. It was every parent's nightmare. Then at dusk our cell phone rang to tell us that two scratched and bug bitten children plus a very tired white dog had been found in the woods. It was the best call of my life. It was time to celebrate!

Today in our Summer of Parables, Jesus tells us two parables—the story of the lost sheep and the story of the lost coin. Jesus first offers the scenario of a shepherd with one hundred sheep who loses one. He leaves the 99 in the wilderness to go search for the one who has been lost, until he finds it. Yet if you had a hundred sheep, how would you ever know that one was missing? If you had five sheep and one is missing; that's easy to notice. One missing sheep out of a hundred is easy to overlook. But this careful shepherd knows exactly who is missing. And instead of taking the loss and racking it up to the cost of doing business, he leaves ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to go after the one that's missing—in order to bring the group back to wholeness. Business is different in the Kingdom of God.

In the second story a woman turns her house upside down to look for one coin. The shepherd's urgent search for his lost sheep is replayed in the woman's urgent search—lighting the lamps, sweeping the floor—for her coin. The lost coin represented about a day's wage for a labourer. And when she finds it, she uses it to throw a party to celebrate. This woman would probably have to spend more on the celebration than she got back when she found the coin. "What woman wouldn't do this?" Jesus asks. The answer is, no woman we know. The point here, of course, is not the animal husbandry skills of the shepherd or the financial management skills of the woman, but the determination and joy of finding the missing. This is the kingdom's greatest joy!

Luke tells us at the end of the sheep story that there is more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over 99 righteous who need no repentance. And at the end of the lost coin story, Luke says, there is joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents. But there's no evidence in the story that the sheep repents. And how exactly does a coin repent? Or could the repenting also be about the Shepherd having a change of heart about searching for the one who is missing.

Both shepherd and woman experience the joy of finding the one that's missing. But there is a subtle shift from the first parable to the second. The guardian of the flock does not claim responsibility for losing it. The woman claims responsibility. Is part of our repenting in admitting our part in the losing and then turning it around by relentlessly going after the one who's missing.

Who is missing here at Oakridge Church? Who has gotten lost? Before the search can begin, we need to notice what, or who, is not here. Perhaps the saddest commentary in any community of faith is to hear a story of a former parishioner who says that when for one reason or another they stopped attending worship—no one called. No one noticed they were missing. Who lives in our neighbourhood but is not present here? Who is excluded? Who is missing?

Jesus' parable comes to us at a particularly important time as the community regathers from COVID isolation. Gradually people have been trickling back—taking that brave step after watching church online for all those months. And still others remain at home, watching online—or not. COVID could be the largest single greatest loss to the church in North American history. Church attendance was already in the decline—but through the pandemic alone congregations are still down in attendance from 20 to 50 percent of their pre-COVID attendance. It's time for us all to be asking, "Who's missing?" Because as today's parables show us, the desire to search for and find the lost is part of the nature of God.

Think of it. Much of the Old Testament is about God's steadfast unrelenting search for the lost children of Israel: exasperating, willful children who won't stay put, who go running after other gods or making foolish alliances with other nations. They suffer horribly for their disobedience, but God always goes after them. "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak," says God in Ezek. 34:16. Jesus also comes looking for those who are missing—tax collectors and sinners—eating and drinking with them and inviting them to the kingdom of God. It seems that it is God's business to find, just as it is a shepherd's business to herd flocks and a woman's business to take care of the family finances. Finding the lost is what God does. And that is a very good thing for us because it's easier to get lost than some of us may think.

The pandemic has caused an unprecedented number of us to lose God from our lives. We make a wrong decision, or fail to make a decision, get caught in a conflict or simply lose our sense of desire and purpose; one thing leads to another and dumps us into a void, a desert, a place of spiritual emptiness.

Wendell Berry tells a parable of being lost. In rural Kentucky there are abandoned homesteads scattered throughout the wooded slopes and hollows. Most of them have nothing left but stone foundations, cellars, chimneys, wells... Sometimes the well is the only structure remaining, and there will be no visible sign of it," because it is covered with decaying old boards that are green with moss or covered with leaves. Berry imagines a hunter, "somebody from a city some distance away, who has a job he doesn't like, and who has come alone out into the country on a Saturday. It is a beautiful, perfect fall day, and the Man feels free. He has left all his constraints and worries and fears behind. Nobody knows where he is. Anybody who wanted to complain or accuse or collect a debt could not find him.... And then, not looking where he is going... he steps onto the rotten boards that cover one of those old wells, and down he goes.

He disappears suddenly out of the lighted world. He falls so quickly that he doesn't have time even to ask what is happening. He hits water and goes under, comes up, swims, or clings to the wall, inserting his fingers between the rocks. ... He calls out... and he hears himself enclosed within the sound of his own calling voice.

How does this story end? Does he save himself? Does he climb up and fall back? Does somebody ... chance to pass by and hear him? Does he despair, give up, and drown? Does he, despairing, pray finally the first true prayer of his life?

The man in the well, the confused and frightened teenager, the person who's lost the zest for life, the one who is isolated and alone who has strayed from the lighted path and finds themselves in a dark place—if you are that person, if you know that person, take heart: God will leave no stone unturned, no corner unswept in God's relentless search for the missing. This is God's nature. And God wants to nudge and lead us to those who are missing—to join in God's relentless search for the missing. And when each one is found, to rejoice with all of heaven in a cry of triumph and jubilation that resounds through all eternity.