

Finder of Sheep and Coins

Luke 15:1-10

READ Luke 15:1-10

We return this morning to a theme of Luke's that we have landed on in a number of these readings as we have worked through this beautiful Gospel: Jesus, friend of sinners. The Pharisees and teachers of the law were mortified that Jesus would welcome sinners to hear him teach and eat with them. They are really going to be bent out of shape when they find out that Jesus actively goes out looking for sinners! But that is exactly what Jesus is about to tell them in these two parables. Jesus is effectively staring down these judges of people, and saying something like: "You are offended that I allow people that you call sinners to eat at my table? Watch this, fellas. I'm fixin' to go out and find us some more of them."

If you look at the headings above the three sections of chapter 15 in your Bibles, you will probably find something like this: "The Parable of the Lost Sheep", "The Parable of the Lost Coin", and "The Parable of the Lost Son". Those headings give you the idea that all these parables are about the same thing, but these first two are in a different category than the third. The third one, which we know more commonly as the parable of the Prodigal Son, tells a story about a lost one who heard God whisper in his ear and returned home. There is some action in that story on the part of the lost thing. Not so in these first two. The lost sheep and the lost coin do nothing to get themselves back to where they belong. The initiative is all on the part of the seeker, who turns everything upside down to find what was lost.

These stories are all about restoration. God made us in His own image, and made us for relationship with Him. The story of creation in Genesis tells us that – tells us that after God had made everything else, He scooped up some of that creation and formed it into us, and breathed into us the breath of life, God's own breath, and made us special and different from all other parts of creation. We were created for a place at the heart of God, a relationship like no other, and God looked at that and called it good. We promptly messed it up. Temptation was around from the beginning, and we proved to be easy

pickings for temptation that plays to our egos and self-centeredness. That is not just a story about two people named Adam and Eve. That is the story of us. And the story of God from that time forward is the story of God's continuous and faithful calling to us to restoration of that relationship that He made us for in the beginning. God did not stop creating after six days; He just paused for Sabbath rest, and went right back to creating. God is still creating, making and forming and shaping us in His image. We are still rebelling, and God is still calling us to restoration.

The shepherd in this first parable is not being irresponsible with regard to the 99 sheep that he knows are safe – he is dedicated to the well-being of all 100 sheep. Jesus says nothing here to suggest that this shepherd should be doing anything other than searching for that one lost sheep. If this was a flock belonging to a community or an extended family, there would have been other shepherds, too, who would have taken the 99 back into the sheep folds and told the other people about the shepherd going after the lost one. And when that shepherd came straggling in with the 1 on his shoulders, it would have been a time for rejoicing. It is the shepherd himself who organizes the party.

This was scandalous for the Pharisees. For them, the law was not about restoration of relationship with God; the law was about dividing people into the righteous and the unrighteous on the basis of adherence to the law as they had defined it. Rejoicing for them would have been in the unrighteous one getting what he deserved, not in his restoration.

There are a couple of different ways to read the story of the woman with the lost coin. That coin would have represented a full day's wages, and it was 10% of all she had. Losing it might be the difference in her family eating or not. It may also have been a prized possession. Barclay tells us that the mark of a married woman was a head-dress made up of 10 coins strung together. She might have saved for a long time to have enough for that head-dress, and it would have been like her wedding ring. Losing one of the coins would have been traumatic.

I lost my original wedding ring a couple of years ago. It came off after 29 years sometime while I was raking the back yard. Gail and I spent hours one Saturday night

dumping out 10 bags of leaves and weeds and dog poop in the garage looking for that ring and never found it. No rejoicing there. I felt naked without it, and got another one quickly.

The stories about recovering the lost sheep and recovering the lost coin are about restoration, about putting things back into the order and place where they belong. These stories are about restoration that happens because the seeker is determined to achieve that end, restoration that happens because nothing will deter the seeker from that objective.

It is clearly God who is the seeker here, whether looking for one out of one hundred or one out of ten or one out of two. It is God who seeks us out for restoration, to get us back into the order and place where we belong, breathing His breath.

The initiative for this restoration is all God's, and we have a name for it: prevenient grace. I suspect that is not a word you have used in a sentence this week. I know I haven't. Actually the only place or usage I have ever seen for the word prevenient is in its association with God's grace. Prevenient means "that which has gone before", and put together with the word "grace" means the "grace that has gone before". This is not just a Methodist or Wesleyan doctrine of description of one the ways that God's grace works for our salvation, but the way of discussing or describing it is distinctly Wesleyan. At the root of the concept of prevenient grace is the truth that when we are separated from God, separated from right relationship with God because of our sin; we are the lost sheep, the lost coin, the outcast, the lost cause, with no hope on our own for finding our way back to where God means for us to be. Tim Tennet says it this way: "...the spiritual life has no hope of a beginning without God's prior action on behalf of the sinner." Our sinful human nature puts us in that hopeless place, and there is nothing we can do to change it.

There is something that God can do to change that situation, and it is God's good pleasure to do just that, and for no reason other than God loves us. God loves you, and more deeply and desperately than you miss a loved one who is not present with you, God misses you when you are separated from Him. So God calls to you where you are, in that place where we put ourselves in through our sin and our self-centeredness, and by His

grace gets your attention so you can begin to respond to His call. Jesus said at John 6:44: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” We understand that to mean that God, on God’s initiative, without regard to our deserving it on our own, exercises His divine will on behalf of each one of us and enables us to hear Him. We will still have the choice to ignore what we hear and reject the offer of life and grace and salvation, but it is through God’s prevenient grace that we have the capacity to choose.

In these parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, it is prevenient grace that motivates the seeker of the lost. It is prevenient grace, God’s grace that is always ahead of us, that gives us the restored capacity in our hearts and minds and will to hear and to respond to the call of God.

The last words of Jesus in the Upper Room before He was arrested were a prayer for us. At John 17:24, we hear Jesus praying for us: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.” God finds you where you are, rejoices that you are found, and desires from God’s own heart that you will choose to be where God is.

Jesus, friend of sinners, searches for you. Be found by Him, and join the party that is life among the found. It is grace, and it is amazing.

Amen