

The story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, (and the Father who welcomes his wayward son home) are all familiar. The image of the shepherd carrying home the lost sheep helps to define our childhood understanding of Jesus; he is the Good Shepherd who carries home the weak and vulnerable lamb. At different times we see ourselves carried home to safety, or found by the diligent search of God, searching like a woman who turns her home upside down to find the lost coin. Jesus tells these parables to a large crowd who would not have carried this image of care by the way he told the parable. Leave the ninety-nine sheep alone to search out one lost sheep? Not a prudent economic decision. Seek a coin when the other coins are already a good measure of wealth—and then give a party? That is foolishness.

Jesus's rhetorical questions likely would have been answered by most of the people in the crowd—with “Would I go looking? —No! maybe later-in the morning when it is less dangerous” or “wait till it turns up—the woman has enough.” Instead, these parables are being reimagined to emphasize the exuberant joy of God finding what is lost--us. And the good news is -- sheep and coins do not have to repent—only be found. Jesus is responding on behalf of the tax collectors who are part of the Empire economy; Jesus's answer is a parable about a God that seeks them out, carries them, rejoices with them, and parties; together they are all in a new place of rejoicing.

When Jesus tells these parable to the growing crowds, it is not a retreat setting of Christians or a quiet moment with his disciples. Large crowds follow Jesus as he teaches in these chapters in Luke; perhaps there is jostling and more to get closer to the teacher whose voice could no doubt be heard over the usual rumble and grumbles, sometimes involving sneers of contempt and suggestions that “I am worthy of being closer to Jesus, not you tax collector who my family dislikes”. Jesus stands beside the dusty road and speaks out; the narrator reminds us “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” The religious community protests they don't approve of Jesus eating with tax collectors and Jesus answers them with these parables that conclude with an extravagant party with joy that is shared.

Jesus points toward a world that does not fully exist, but that God desires. God's story today is not about our repentance, but the commitment of God to find what has been lost. It is a distraction to think about repentance here as movement that we make toward God that brings us home. The movement is on the part of God who initiates. God's love, mercy or compassion keeps searching--in dangerous and unlikely places until a great joy is shared. It is not a singular joy, but a joy that overflows and invites others into the powerful place of restoration, communion and community filled with an abundant shared joy.

Parables can have different meaning, speaking to our spirits in the different moments of our lives. That is one of the gifts of reading scripture together. Today we are invited to be found and to celebrate with a God who keeps looking until God finds what has been lost--and then gives a party!

