

Luke 15:1-10

Rejoicing

As I considered the story of the lost sheep, the one who wandered off and was no longer with the other ninety-nine, for the first time ever I thought about a parent with children. I have three children and if one would have been that lost when they were little, I know that I would have found a way to search for that child, even if it meant leaving the other two behind as securely as I could, to search for the one that was lost.

There is a story shared in something that I read that may hit a note for you and get you thinking more deeply about what is going on in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. It was in a sermon by a man named Hugh Reed and quoted in a Book by Paul Scott Wilson. Here is the story...

Allan (not his real name) came to me at my previous church in Hamilton, wanting to be baptized. He was a child (or victim) of the "me decade" and felt compelled to leave home and family to find himself and, of course, lost himself, becoming a stranger to himself and the world, wandering the streets of Vancouver trapped in a world of drugs. One night he managed to get off the street for a night in one of the shelters. He crashed into the bunk, staring up at the ceiling, listening to the groans, and trying not to be overcome by the odors of the strangers in the bunks around him. He didn't know where he was, he didn't know who he was, but he wanted it to be over with and he considered how he might take his own life.

He was shaken out of these thoughts when someone came in and called out a name from another world.

"Is Allan Roberts here?"

That had been his name once but he hadn't heard it for some time. He hardly knew Allan Roberts anymore. It couldn't be him being called.

The caller persisted, "Is there anybody named Allan Roberts here?"

No one else answered and so Allan took a risk. "I'm Allan Roberts (or used to be)."

"Your mother's on the phone."

My mother, no, you've made a mistake. I don't know where I am, how could my mother know where I am?

"If you're Allan Roberts, your mother's on the phone."

Unsure what to expect, he went to the desk in the hall and took the receiver. "Allan," it was his mother, "It's time for you to come home."

"Mom, I don't know where I am, I have no money, you don't know what I'm like anymore. I can't go home."

"It's time for you to come home. There's a Salvation Army officer who's coming to you with a plane ticket. He's going to take you to the airport to get you home."

She hadn't known where he was, she just called every shelter and hostel for months until she found him.

He went home and, supported and loved by his mother, who had never ceased to know him even though he had forgotten himself, and influenced and inspired by the faith that had sustained his mother's hope and love, he began attending church services and one day came to my office seeking to be baptized.

He did not find his own way to my office . . . A path, not of his own making, [was] made by the love that found him, that knew him better than he knew himself, and invited him to "follow me."¹

It seems to me that so often when we read or interpret these parables it is about the lost being found. The focus becomes the one who was lost. The titles that are given for these readings tend to move us into a certain kind of thinking, the lost sheep, the lost coin. We focus on what was lost. And that is important.

Still, rarely have I heard much about the one doing the seeking, the person searching for the sheep and the woman searching for the coin, just as this mother searched for her son in the preceding story. And yet these stories are as much about the one doing the searching as it is about the one who is lost. What is wonderful and important about the parables of Jesus is that we have the opportunity to place ourselves in the story. We may find ourselves as the one seeking, the one lost, or one of those who are watching from a distance and judging. A question we could ask is, are we like the religion scholars who were not please, not at all pleased, that Jesus had people of doubtful reputation hanging around him, eating meals with them and treating them like old friends?

Think about who you share meals with and the importance we place on having meals with those who are important to us. In ancient times, those meals said a lot about who you were and the religious scholars were not impressed that Jesus was sharing a meal with those who did not measure up in their eyes...those who were part of the religious "in" crowd.

¹ From a sermon by Hugh Reed, as quoted in Paul Scott Wilson, *Setting Words on Fire: Putting God at the Center of the Sermon* (Abingdon, 2008, pp. 159-60)...Scott Hozee. [Luke 15:1-10 - Center for Excellence in Preaching](#)

If you are anything like me, I often catch myself judging others. Each time I have to repent and ask God to forgive me and allow me to see them as beloved children of God. Judgement is easy. We think we know better. We decide who is in and who is out. And there are the people we just down right give up on thinking there is no way they will ever amount to much and can never succeed. In our judgement we think that they likely deserve to be in the position they have found themselves in, particularly when their circumstances have them in constant crisis. I could go on. Yet it is in response to that attitude of the religious scholars that Jesus tells the stories of the lost sheep and lost coin.

However, parables, the stories of Jesus are never just a single layer, there are those who are doing the judging and excluding, and there are those who truly do feel lost, like there is nothing they can do to find their way back to wholeness. And this story is also for them and for us who identify with that as well, like the gentleman whose story I shared at the beginning of this sermon.

Lost people, those who were of doubtful reputation, were also listening to Jesus and learning that God is relentlessly in pursuit of us. God will go to extraordinary lengths to find us. And what you may not have noticed is that the sheep and the coin may not have even realize that they are lost. They likely think that they are just fine. Yet they are not where they should be, nor with the people they should be with. God is like the person who risks the safety of the whole herd to find the one that is lost, or like the woman who scourges the house looking in every nook and cranny until the coin is found.

This is the good news, that God loves you and me, each human being so much, that God will not rest until we are in relationship with God, restored to relationship with others as much as is possible, and restored to community.

This is what God does. However, sometimes we never realize that we are lost, and if we do we think we are not worth rescuing. We reject anything or anyone that might be the opportunity to realize that it is God who is seeking us. Wherever you find yourself in these stories, know that God will not give up seeking you, searching for you or those you love.

I wish I could say that every story has a happy ending but we know from lived experience that is not the case, but it is never because God has given up.

There is one more thing I would like to say about this parable and that is the part about the party. When the sheep was found the person who found their sheep calls friends and neighbours to say "Celebrate with me!" And the woman who found her coin says "Celebrate with me!"

The joy that God and all of heaven experiences when the lost is found is beyond anything that seems reasonable. And that too perturbs the religious scholars. Consider your own experience...you see someone being celebrated that you think did nothing to deserve it. You either don't except the invitation to the party or you go but continue to judge the generosity of love and acceptance that is given. It is then that we become the lost, just like the religious scholars. Our judgement takes away our joy.

But God's joy?! That exceeds anything we could imagine, and that is the Good News. As one can find in the writings of Isaiah in the Old Testament,

"I [God] don't think the way you think. The way you work isn't the way I work...For as the sky soars high above earth, so the way I work surpasses the way you work, and the way I think is beyond the way you think...So you'll go out in joy, you'll be led into a whole and complete life." (Isaiah 55: 8-9, 12, The Message).

Thanks be to God that we are relentlessly loved.

Rejoice in the Lord!

Rejoice in and with each other!

Rejoice that all are precious to God.

Have a party and celebrate God

and God's grace and amazing love for you and for all.

I speak to you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.