

Who Is the Lost One?

Today, we have two of the three parables from this 'lost chapter' of Luke's Gospel account. The third parable, usually titled "The Prodigal Son" could just as easily be titled "The Lost Son" which could change how we interpret that parable, but then that is for another time. There is enough in the parables that we heard today that we do not need to be bringing in another parable. Whenever we look at the parables that Jesus tells us, we do need to keep in mind that Jesus is primarily giving us a glimpse into the character of God the Father. Naturally, there are things that we can learn about ourselves, relationships and the like, but primarily, the parables are about God. Jesus sets the parables into language to which we can relate. However, Jesus adds a twist somewhere in the parable that shows us the extravagance of God and how limited we think and act. Knowing what and where the twist occurs will also give us more insight into the parable. So, with all this, let us turn our attention to the two parables we heard today, the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin.

In the parable of the lost sheep, the twist comes even before Jesus gets to the parable itself. He sets up the parable with the question of who would not go after the one lost sheep, leaving the other 99 alone in the wilderness. In manufacturing, as well as in farming, there is a certain level of loss that is acceptable. Certainly, losing 1% of the flock would be considered remarkable in those days and a totally acceptable loss rate. Even today, I would think that a 1% loss would be more than acceptable. So, in direct answer to Jesus' question, probably no one would go out looking for that one lost sheep and risk losing more from the 99 who are left behind.

But then, this highlights even further the glimpse of God's character that Jesus gives us. The only level of loss that is acceptable to God is no loss at all.

God will spare no effort in getting back that one thing that had strayed from 'the flock.' Of course, as we have learned, we can see this on more than one level. On the simplest level, we see it as someone who repents and returns to following God. However, on a different level, we can see that this could be a parable about God giving grace abundantly and without hesitation or limit to those who had lost their way and strayed from following God.

In terms of the parable of the lost coin, unlike the sheep, the coin did nothing on its own to get 'lost.' Somehow it got misplaced - either by the woman herself who put it in a place where she wouldn't forget; or it got dropped and rolled somewhere; or the family pet picked it up and put it somewhere; or whatever, but the coin itself did not get lost. If you consider the effort that she put into finding it and then the expense of the celebration afterwards with her friends and neighbors, we see another example of the extravagance of God's love for God's creation. Do you know of anyone who would go to those kinds of extremes of finding something and then celebrating? Would you be willing to do this? The honest answer is that there are very, very few people who would even attempt this level of extravagance.

That brings us to a troublesome verse - the verse about the ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. The Protestant position, which was largely influenced by Martin Luther, states that there is no one who is righteous and does not need repentance. So, who are these ninety-nine who do not need to repent? We can take a look through the Old Testament, to find examples of people who were considered righteous. First, there is Abraham, whose trust and faith in God and God's promises to Abraham was enough to be considered righteous. There also was Moses, King David as well as the prophets. In all these instances, everyone had character flaws of some sort and each of them had times when they did not follow God's will. However, what made them righteous was their

trust and faith in God and God's promises. They were aware of their flaws and they were aware when they sinned. In Psalm 51, David says that it is only against God that he sins. David recognizes that sin is going against what God wants and that ultimately, whenever he committed a sin which hurt someone, he was breaking God's commandments. These flawed people, when recognizing their sin, repented and turned back towards God, seeking forgiveness and help in not sinning again.

This attitude is in contrast with the Pharisees and Scribes who were taking exception to Jesus eating and socializing with sinners. They were certain that they were following God's commandments and as long as they did what the law required of them, then they could declare themselves to be righteous. Righteousness, in a way, is not something that we can declare for ourselves. In one aspect of righteousness, it is something that is done to us, done for us. We are seen to have been out of synch with God's ways (or a higher authority's ways) and that we need to be made right again. We need to confess our transgression, acknowledging that what we did was wrong and ask for forgiveness. Once that forgiveness is granted, then we are made righteous. As we have seen with the people in the Old Testament, righteousness is something that is declared about a person because of their faith, their trust in God and their desire to do God's will.

The questions still remain of how do we know if we are righteous with God and who are those 'ninety-nine'? It is much like the concept of humility and being humble that was the focus of last week's Gospel text from Luke 14. It is not something that we can achieve on our own, not something that we can declare that we have achieved, but by doing what we were created and called by God to be and do, then it is something that is said about us. It all starts with trust and faith in God and a desire to follow God's will. It is not focused on doing a bunch of things because that is what the law says we must do. Being righteous, at the end of the day, involves our acknowledging our own limits and sinfulness, having a desire in

following God's will and having the trust that God's will really is the best thing for us.

On the other hand, in self-righteousness we do all the things that need to be done to be made right. We follow all the rules, we do what we need to do if we break those rules. We focus on the law and we measure ourselves and others against the law and how well we adhere to the legalism that we had set up. When we make those measurements, we skew them so that we usually come out on top, we are harsher on our fellow humans than we are on ourselves. The Pharisees and Scribes did this and in their measuring, put themselves on a pedestal saying that they were better than everyone else. To use a metaphor that Jesus used, they saw the speck in their neighbor's eye and not the log in their own eye.

So, it now comes down to how do we welcome a stranger who comes into our home, our church? Do we look down on them with disdain like the Pharisees and Scribes, thinking that they will never be 'good enough' to come here? Or do we act like an angel and rejoice that someone like us, a fellow sinner, has come seeking repentance and forgiveness, acknowledging their inability to overcome the forces that are taking them away from God and towards eternal death and are willing to let God take over? How would you like to be treated?

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/ID8mC2vXlpk>

Service: <https://youtu.be/QLymvqpdw2E>