

LOST & FOUND—SHEEP/COINS/PEARLS/HIDDEN TREASURES
LUKE 15:1-10 / MATTHEW 13:44-50
OCTOBER 06, 2024

Have you ever lost anything? No? Just me, eh? I wouldn't like to calculate the number of hours, days, weeks...I've spent looking for stuff that should have been at my finger tips all the time. Glasses—anybody? Car keys? Tools? Car, boat or lawnmower parts when you've taken something apart? Or who hasn't lost a child in a busy theme park or mall? That's terrifying. Of all the things I've lost though, I miss my mind the most!

Well, we're nearing the end of our series on Jesus' parables, so it's no surprise you have to have at least 1 smorgasbord or Heinz (57 varieties) to couple together a number of them that don't really merit a full message each Sunday. So, before I begin

People love Luke 15. It has been called "the Gospel in the Gospel" because it contains the very essence of the good news which Jesus came to tell. It was a very real offence to the scribes & Pharisees that Jesus associated with men & women who, by the orthodox, were labelled as sinners. The Pharisaic regulations insisted that they not be entrusted with money, their testimony not be accepted, they were not to be trusted with any secret, or allowed to be the custodian of charitable funds, & they were not to be accompanied on a journey. So they were shocked to the core when Jesus befriended/associated with people who would defile Him. And get ready for this: strict Jews said: "There will be joy in heaven over 1 sinner who is obliterated before God." They looked sadistically forward not to the saving but to the destruction of the sinner. Now the parable of the lost sheep has context.

Shepherds in Judea had a hard & dangerous task. Pasture was scarce. The central plateau was only a few miles wide, then plunged down in cliffs inhabited by wild animals & then desert. There were no restraining walls & the sheep wandered. The shepherd was personally responsible for the sheep. If a sheep was lost the shepherd must at least bring home the fleece to show how it had died. These shepherds were expert trackers & could follow the straying sheep's footprints for miles. It was all in a day's work for a shepherd to risk his life for his sheep.

There's more. Many of the flocks belonged not to individuals, but to villages, with two or three shepherds in charge. Those whose flocks arrived home first would bring news that one shepherd was still out on the mountain side searching for a lost sheep. Then the whole village was on the watch & when in the distance they saw the shepherd striding home with the lost sheep across his shoulders, the whole community shouted with joy & thanksgiving. Now you get it.

Jesus drew that picture of God. That is what God is like. God too, knows the joy of finding things that have been lost! The tremendous truth here is that God is kinder than we are. People may give up hope of a sinner, but not God. He loves those who never stray away, but in His heart there is the joy of joys when a lost one is found & comes home.

Who hasn't lost money or been ripped off by some scam? It wouldn't be difficult to lose a coin in a Palestinian peasant's home. The houses were very dark, lit by 1 small window. The floor was beaten earth covered with dried reeds & rushes—a coin on a floor like that would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. The woman swept the floor hoping she might see the glint of the coin.

The silver coin in question was more than a full day's wage in that place & time. Such families were never far from hunger. There's intensity here: if the woman did not find the coin, perhaps the family would not eat. But there's another possibility. The mark of a married woman was a headdress made of ten silver coins linked by a silver chain. Sometimes a girl would scrape & save to amass her ten coins. The headdress was almost equivalent to her wedding ring. Once in possession it was so inalienably hers that it could not even be taken from her for debt. So the search may have been as intense as if she was searching for her marriage ring.

So it's easy to understand the joy when at last the coin was found. God, said Jesus, is like that. The joy of God, & of all the angels, when one sinner comes home is just like that—like a coin which has stood between them & starvation has been lost & is found. It is like the joy of a woman who loses her most precious possession, with a value far beyond money, then finds it again.\

No Pharisee had ever dreamed of a God like that. This was absolutely new—Jesus teaching that God actually searched for people, for sinners. And we see that love incarnate in Jesus, who came to seek & save that which is lost. Thank you, Jesus!

Now to the found. Although most people use banks today, no doubt we've heard of or know someone who stuffs money under a mattress or in some other hidden place out of view. This was much more common in Jesus' day. Remember the worthless servant who hid his master's talent in the ground. Palestine was probably the most fought over country in the world & what was one day your garden could the next day be a battlefield, so it was the safest thing to bury valuables, in the event that you might have to flee one day & retrieve those valuables one day when you might return. Jewish law was clear: Whatever is found belongs to the finder. So the man in the parable was quite within his right to claim what he had found.

Apart from that, the great point of this parable is the joy of the discovery that made the man willing to give up everything to ensure the treasure was his own. The man found the treasure not by chance but more accurately in his day's work. Though he stumbled upon it, he did so while he was going about his daily business. And it's fair to point out he wasn't just scraping the surface, he was industriously digging deep. Whether the mason is working the stone or the carpenter is working the wood, Jesus is there. The presence of God, the sense of Jesus are all to be found in the day's work, when the day's work is honestly & conscientiously done.

So what does this parable teach? It is worth any sacrifice to enter the Kingdom, where God's will is as perfectly done on earth as it is in heaven—sound familiar? Therefore, to enter the Kingdom is to accept & do God's will. To accept it may require giving up certain aims & ambitions. You may be taking up your cross to

follow Jesus. That said, there is no other way to peace of mind & heart in this life & to glory in the life to come. It's absolutely worth giving up everything to accept & do the will of God!

On to pearls. Pearls were highly regarded in Jesus' earthly time for both their value & their beauty. The main source of pearls was the Red Sea (& even far away Britain!). But a merchant would scour the markets of the world to find a pearl that was of outstanding beauty.

Since a pearl was the loveliest of possessions, how fitting to compare it with the Kingdom of heaven—the loveliest thing in the world. Once again the reminder, that to be in the Kingdom is to accept & do the will of God & that is indeed a lovely thing. Beyond the discipline, the sacrifice, the selfdenial & the cross there is a supreme loveliness which is found nowhere else. And it's the only way to bring peace to the heart, joy to the mind, beauty to life—that is—accepting & doing the will of God. While there are other pearls, only one is of great price. So things like knowledge, philosophy, art, music & literature can be worthy & commendable, they fall short of the supreme beauty that lies in the acceptance of the will of God. It is worth any-thing to accept it. That pearl is Jesus.

And finally, to the net. It was the most natural thing in the world that Jesus should use illustrations from fishing when he was speaking to fishermen. “Look how your daily work speaks to you of the things of heaven.”

When the boat landed the catch was separated—the good catch & the useless catch. There are two lessons from this parable. First, the dragnet does not & cannot discriminate. Its contents are a mixture—just like the church, which is the instrument of God's Kingdom on earth. The church is a mixture of all kinds of people—good & bad, useless & useful.

This is worth pausing on. There've always been two views of what the church is or should be. One view is that it should be exclusive; the other that it should be inclusive. The exclusive view holds that the church is for people who are good, who are fully committed & who are quite different from the world. As attractive as that may seem, it's not the New Testament view. Who is to judge—when Jesus tells us not to judge. Who can say who is committed to Christ & who is not? The inclusive view contends that the church must be open to all—just like the dragnet. That's exactly what this parable teaches. But that has significance for each of us. It means, surprise, surprise, that the church is certainly not perfect, nor are the individuals in it. We are, in fact, a hospital, where people are mutually helped, healed & encouraged out of all kinds of brokenness. Any separation, getting back to the dragnet is God's work, not ours. Our role, our duty, is to gather in all who will come.