*I FOUND YOU!*

Luke 15:1-10

July 5, 2020

I don’t think there is a chapter in the Gospel of Luke as dearly beloved as the fifteenth chapter, the first part of which is here before us. It has been called “the Gospel in the gospel,” as if it contained the very distilled essence of the good news which Jesus came to tell.

These parables, of the lost sheep and the lost coin, and the rest of the chapter, which is the lost son (oh, we call it the Prodigal Son) [these parables, as I was saying] arose out of definite situations. It was an offense to the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus associated with men and women who, by the orthodox, were labeled as sinners.

The Pharisees gave to people who did not keep the Law a general classification. They called them T*he People of the Land*; and there was a complete barrier between the Pharisees and the People of the Land. The Pharisaic regulations laid it down, “When a man is one of the people of the land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of the charitable funds, and do not accompany him on a journey.”

A Pharisee was forbidden to be a guest of any such a one, or have them as his guest. He was even forbidden, so far as it was possible, to have any business dealings with them. It was the deliberate Pharisaic aim to avoid every contact with all people who did not observe each small detail of the Law, much less sinners, who actually, willfully broke the Law.

Obviously, they would be shocked to the core at the way in which Jesus companied with people who were not only rank outsiders, but sinners. We will understand these parables more fully if we remember that the strict Jews said, not “There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents,” but, “There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God.” They looked sadistically forward not to the saving, but to the destruction of the sinner.

So Jesus told them a parable of a lost sheep an of a shepherd’s joy. The shepherd in Judea had a hard and dangerous task. Pasture was scarce. The narrow central plateau was only a few miles wide, and then it plunged down to the wild cliffs and the terrible wasteland of the desert. There were no restraining walls, and the sheep would wander. George Adam Smith, pastor, historian, and cultural observer of the late 1800s wrote of the shepherd, “On some high moor across which at night the hyaenas howl, when you meet him, sleepless, far-sighted, weather-beaten, armed, learning on his staff and looking out over his scattered sheep, every one of them on his heart, you understand why the shepherd of Judea sprang to the front in his people’s history; why their first great king was one, why Christ took him as the type of self-sacrifice.”

The shepherd didn’t always own the sheep, but was personally responsible for each one. If a sheep was lost, the shepherd had to at least bring home the fleece to show how it had died. These shepherds were experts at tracking and could follow the straying sheep’s footprints for miles across the hills. To risk his life for his sheep was all in a day’s work.

Many of the flocks were communal flocks, belonging, not to individuals, but to villages. There would be two or three shepherds in charge. Those whose flocks were safe would arrive home on time and bring news that one shepherd was still out on the mountainside searching for a sheep which was lost.

The whole village would be on the watch, and when, in the distance, they saw the shepherd making his way home with the lost sheep across his shoulders, there would arise for the community a shout of joy and thanksgiving.

That’s the picture Jesus drew of God: “That,” said Jesus, “is what God is like. God is as glad when a lost sinner is found as a shepherd is when a strayed sheep is bought home.” As a great person of the faith said, “God, too, knows the joy of finding things that have gone lost.”

This parable shows us a thing or two about God’s rejoicing love. The first is that God’s love is *pointed* and it’s *personal*. The ninety-nine were not enough; one sheep was out on the hillside and the shepherd could not rest until he had brought it home.

However large a family a parent has, they cannot spare even one; there is not one who does not matter. God is like that. God cannot be happy until the last lost soul is gathered in.

Second, the love of God is a *patient love*. Sheep are proverbially foolish creatures. The sheep has no one but itself to blame for the danger gets itself into. People are apt to have little patience with fools. When they get into trouble, we are apt to say, “it’s their own fault; they brought it on themselves. Don’t waste any sympathy on those fools.”

God isn’t like that. The sheep might be foolish, but the shepherd would still risk his life to save it. Men and women may be fools but God loves even the foolish one who has no one to blame but herself for her sin and sorrow.

The *individual* love, the *pointed* love of God is a *seeking love*. The shepherd was not content to wait for the sheep to come back. He went out to search for it.

And that is what the Jew could not understand about the Christian idea of God. The Jew would gladly agree that, if the sinner came crawling wretchedly back home, God would forgive. But we know that God is far more awesome than that. For in Jesus Christ He came to seek for those who wander away. God is not content to wait until men and women come home; He goes out to search for them, no matter what it costs him.

So this parable of the lost sheep is one of seeking and finding and rejoicing. So is the next one, the parable of the Lost coin. The coin in question in this parable was a silver drachma. A drachma is also a weight of silver, about equal to an apothecary’s dram, which is about 1/8 of an ounce, so on today’s market (and I looked it up last night)\_ the silver coin would be worth about $2.27. The thing is, that was more than a day’s wages in Jesus’ time.

And it would not be difficult to lose a coin in a Judean peasant’s house; and it might take a long search to find it. The houses were very dark, because they were lit by one little circular window not much more than about 18 inches across. The floor was beaten earth covered with dried reeds and rushes; and to look for a coin on a floor like what was very much like looking for a needle in a haystack. The woman swept the floor in the hope that she might see the coin glint or hear it jingle as it moved.

There are a couple of reasons why the woman might have been so eager to find the coin, and why the search would be worthy of telling.

First, it may have been a matter of sheer necessity. $2.27 doesn’t sound like very much, but as I said, it was more than a whole day’s wage for a working man in Judea. A whole days’ wage. Say you made 12.50 an hour (that’s #36,000 a year). Gives one a glimpse of what we’re talking about with a $15.00 an hour minimum wage nowadays. One day at 12.50 is $100. Wouldn’t you search high and low for a lost $100 bill in your house? I would! These people lived always on the edge of things, and very little stood between them and real hunger, or real homelessness, if they didn’t actually own the house they lived in. And, of course, most didn’t. The woman may well have searched with such intensity because, if she did not find it, the family would be out on the street.

There’s another reason, too, why this woman might have been so anxious to find the coin. The first reason—the real financial necessity—is gripping, but this one’s nice. The mark of a married woman was a headdress made of ten silver coins linked together by a silver chain. You may have seen pictures of Judean women with these bracelets for their heads. For years maybe, a girl would scrape and save to amass her ten coins, for this headdress was the equivalent of her wedding ring. When she had it, it was so inalienably hers that it could not even be taken from her for debt. It might really have been one of these coins that this woman in our parable had lost, and so she searched for it as hard as any woman would if she had lost her wedding ring.

In either case, it easy to think of the joy of the woman when at last she saw the glint of the elusive coin and when she held in in her hand again.

Jesus said God is like that. The joy of God and of all the angels, when one sinner comes home, is like the joy of a home when a coin which has stood between them and starvation has been lost and is found; it is like the joy of a woman who loses her most precious possession, with a value far beyond money, and then finds it again.

No Pharisee had ever dreamed of a God like that. A Jewish scholar has admitted that this is the one absolutely new thing that Jesus taught us about God—that He actually searched for people. The Jew might have agreed that if one came crawling home to God in self-abasement and prayed for pity, he might find it. But the Jew would never have conceived of a God who went out to search for sinners, for you and me.

We believe in the seeking love of God, you and I, because we see that love embodied in Jesus, the son of God, who came to seek and to save the lost.

Amen.