

## **Lost and Found**

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Jeremiah 4: 11-12, 22-28  
Luke 15:1-10  
Psalm 14:1-7

These two parables in Luke are not ones I have focused on much in my life. The parable that follows these two, the story of the prodigal son, is told more often. It has better possibilities for augmentation and exaggeration — with pigs and prostitutes, the big bad city and the jealous older brother. But a sheep, a coin? What promise do these hold for storytelling?

It wasn't until my children went to CFMS (Christian Family Montessori School) that I began to understand these parables from a different perspective. You saw Wendy present the parables this morning. This is how children receive the Biblical text in the atrium, the room for religious education at CFMS.

I had been accustomed, if I talked about it all, to call this the parable of the lost coin and similarly the parable of the lost sheep. I thought that the important thing was that the coin was lost and then found, that the sheep was lost and then recovered. But at CFMS the parable is called the Found Coin. The sheep story is called the Good Shepherd.

What a great story for children. Most children are familiar with being separated from their parents, either because of daycare and school or because they wander off exploring newfound independence in the store, the park, the museum or even church. My body still remembers the fear I had when, as a

child, I lost my mother in the grocery store. I had no idea how I would ever find her again. And I wasn't sure if she missed me.

Now I know this experience from the parent perspective. It is heart stopping to lose track of one's child. At age 3, Jamie wandered away in the crowd at the waterfront in Annapolis. I don't claim to be as dedicated as the Good Shepherd who left 99 sheep in the wilderness to go search for the one that was lost — but I did call and look and enlist help from others until he was found. As a child or parent, what a comfort to know that the shepherd looks after the sheep, that the woman will continue the search until the lost coin is found.

What is striking to me as I watch the presentation of the Found Coin story is that the woman calls her friends in for a party after that little, insignificant coin is found. I had somehow missed that, the friends, the party, the joy. And of course the same is true in the parable of the Good Shepherd. There is joy and celebration when the shepherd returns home from the wilderness with all 100 of the sheep.

In my growing up, we did not highlight these parables. Perhaps it held little meaning for us. We, who gathered faithfully on Sunday mornings and evenings and often at midweek, didn't think we were lost. And aside from one miserable evangelism campaign, we were not so concerned with finding lost souls. We did not pay much attention to those who were wandering the hillsides and the highways. We were not aware of the small change that fell from our pockets.

Finding the lost was not as important as our own safety and purity. Certainly the extravagance of having a party simply because something that was

once lost was now found was not at all part of our Mennonite mentality. That would be wasteful; the money could be used to give to the poor. What good disciples we were.

Luke writes, “Now, all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ ” In the previous chapter, Jesus had been eating with the Pharisees. Remember the story he told the Pharisees about where they should sit when they go to a dinner party? At the most out of the way place. Now Jesus is eating with sinners instead of the Pharisees and scribes. This does not go unnoticed.

Jesus does not directly rebuke the Pharisees for their grumbling gossip. He tells these parables as a way to illustrate his commitments and that perhaps they should follow his example. His commitment is to finding and rescuing those who are lost, even the most insignificant penny, for a silver coin was really worth hardly anything. It is strange indeed that the shepherd is willing to risk the other 99 sheep also wandering off while a search is conducted for one. It seems a bit over the top that more importance is put on one lost penny than the nine coins already in hand.

But Jesus’ emphasis is not on the lost — who have done nothing to get themselves lost or found. The emphasis is on the concerned and dedicated seeker. The celebration afterward is for all who come to celebrate with the finder. What silly, absolute joy.

The Hebrew Bible lectionary reading for the day is such a contrast to this that one is not sure how to understand the pairing of these two texts. Luke's God is over the top, concerned for the smallest lost item. Jeremiah's God on the other hand is so angry that the blowing wind does not refresh or carry away the chaff. This wind rages so that it annihilates everything.

<sup>23</sup> I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;  
and to the heavens, and they had no light.

<sup>25</sup> I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,  
and all the birds of the air had fled.

<sup>26</sup> I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert.

This scene is the opposite of the creation in Genesis. The Earth is once again void: no light, no birds, no people, no plants. In Genesis, God's breath blows over the face of the earth bringing life. In Jeremiah, the wind brings chaos. God is not the creator, but the demolisher.

If the sheep and the coin just happen to get lost that is not the case in Jeremiah. The people of Israel are deliberate in their idolatry; they are intentional in their turn away from God. Their breaking of the covenant is conscious and the consequences follow. Patrick Miller in the New Interpreters Bible comments that "Covenant and creation are so connected that the dissolution of the one threatens the other."

As Christians, we often take our cues from what we read in the Bible. Perhaps pastor Terry Jones of Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Fla., sees the United States turning away from God as Jeremiah saw Israel turning

away. Jones' threat to burn the Qur'an on Sept. 11 because "it is full of lies" certainly would have had consequences and could have brought chaos. But are we to judge who God loves, who has broken the covenant and then impose the consequences? Are we to take upon ourselves the role of God's wrath?

Another pastor in Gainesville must emphasize a different part of the Bible. According to Mennonite Weekly Review (Sept 20, 2010), Eve MacMaster from Emmanuel Mennonite Church has worked for many years to create opportunities for Christian Muslim dialogue. Instead of invoking God's fury, she builds relationships with those who are deemed the enemy. So too has First Mennonite Church in Champaign-Urbana, Ill. They share a peace garden with the local mosque and Islamic center. The peace garden slogan is "Muslims and Mennonites planting peace, one seed at a time."

As people who espouse peacemaking, I imagine we are more drawn to this image of the good shepherd or the diligent woman than God the destroyer. But we should be aware that what seems a striking image to us today — the beautiful, gentle shepherd carrying the clean sheep on his shoulders — would have caused some stir in Jesus' day.

First century shepherds, especially the hirelings, were not the most reputable of characters. They were considered filthy thieves, not to be trusted. Jesus gives shepherds some respect. He lifts up those on the bottom rung socially and economically. Even more, he invites those who pride themselves on being the cleanest and purist, the religious leaders, to identify with the shepherd and the poor woman.

Jesus not only invites them to identify with the shepherd and the woman; he assumes the Pharisees will party with them as well. He calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”

She calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”

The complaint of the Pharisees is proven true; Jesus does eat with sinners and tax collectors. And in telling the parable of the sinful shepherd and the poor woman he is inviting the Pharisees to do the same. The proud and pure are invited to follow the example of those who are poorest: the shepherd and the woman. The proud and pure are invited to the party in celebration of the found.

Jeremiah reminds us that when we break the covenant with God and with our neighbors, we should not be surprised if chaos ensues, if even the creation responds with fury.

Jesus tells us that we may be safely in the fold or accounted for in the purse, but there is not a party planned in our honor. The real celebration is for those who are lost and then found.

Let us seek until we find. Then, let's rejoice and have a grand meal.