

## Celebrate with Me!

In a parsonage we once lived in, a favorite pen was kept beside the phone for notes and messages. One day I went to grab the pen. But it wasn't there! It had apparently grown legs and walked away. So in a somewhat accusatory tone, I asked my husband, "What did you do with the pen by the phone? Where did you put it?"

Well. In his usual patient manner and with his customary forbearance, Bob replied, "I don't know. I'll look for it." He stopped what he was doing and conducted a search. He had looked in more than a few places before I opened a kitchen drawer. And there was the pen! Right where *I* had unthinkingly put it. As my dear spouse gently pointed out to me. What was lost had been found.

What about you? Do things around your house have a way of disappearing? What have *you* misplaced lately? Glasses? Car keys? An umbrella? Maybe even cash? When we lose something, doesn't it drive us nuts? Aren't we likely to spend

considerable time and energy looking for what's lost? And isn't it a marvelous feeling when what was lost is found?

Today in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is talking about losing and finding. As he continues on his way to Jerusalem, those ever-vigilant Pharisees and scribes are still at it. Grousing and murmuring against him. Because they don't approve of some of the people in the increasingly larger crowds gathering to hear Jesus. They don't approve of the disreputable sort of folk he's hanging out with.

Didn't your parents used to tell you that you're judged by the company you keep? Sounds as though the Pharisees and scribes are judging Jesus by the company *he* keeps. Like members of the world's oldest profession. Like tax collectors who line their own pockets and collaborate with the despised occupying forces of empire. Sinners! Religious leaders have been pointing fingers at this One who welcomes sinners and even *eats* with them.

So in response, Jesus tells them a couple of stories. One thing that's important to understand here is that these parables *aren't* so much for the benefit of Jesus' disciples or even of the

crowds around him. Jesus is speaking directly to the scribe and the Pharisee. That's what Luke wants us to keep in mind.

During most of this Christian year, we've been following Jesus through Luke's Gospel. More than any other gospel writer, Luke shows us that among the people who encounter Jesus are the poor and the lowly. The powerless. The excluded. And maybe you've noticed that Luke often pairs a story of a man with a story of a woman. He wants us to know that *all* people, created in God's image, have a place in God's reign. We see that truth in today's reading.

Jesus begins with a shepherd. A shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to go and look for a lost one. Those Pharisees "get" the symbolism that's going on here. They get that when Jesus talks about those ninety-nine sheep, he's really talking about *them*.

Could Jesus be suggesting that they, the leaders of the faith community, are to be left, like the ninety-nine, in the barren wilderness? They don't like *that* idea! The wilderness is not a place of protection. Nor is it a place of nourishment. Nor comfort. It's not a good place to be left while this shepherd goes off in search of a single strayed sheep. It's not a good place to be

left while this shepherd looks for that lost sheep. It's not a good place to be left while this shepherd tenderly lifts up the found one and carries it home. And *rejoices*, calling friends and neighbors. Saying "Come! Celebrate with me!"

So these religious professionals have their noses out of joint and their teeth set on edge, and not only because of being left. For even though in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Holy One of Israel is often portrayed as a shepherd, scribe and Pharisee don't appreciate *Jesus* casting God in the role of a shepherd. In their day and time, shepherding is an occupation not held in high esteem. No respectable person would be caught *dead* tending sheep. Shepherds have a bad rap. Shepherds are scorned as shiftless, wandering, no-account drifters. Shepherds are low men on the totem pole in terms of social standing.

And speaking of social standing—Jesus follows up his first illustration with a second: one featuring a *woman*! You already know about the diminished social standing and repression of women in the biblical world.

This woman in Jesus' second parable has lost a treasured possession. A coin. One the ten coins she has. What's up with her and these ten coins? Do they represent her life savings?

Probably not. In her culture, when a woman marries, she has a dowry, which would've been around the amount of these ten *drachmas*. Each is worth about a day's wage. These ten coins don't represent a huge sum of money. But she's had them since she married her husband. To her, these coins are priceless. She may have tied them into a pocket handkerchief. Or strung them together into a bridal necklace that she would wear throughout her marriage. That would mean just as much to her as a spouse's wedding ring means today.

Each coin is precious to her. So when one of them goes missing, the first thing she does is light a lamp, counting on its glow to catch the coin's silver gleam. Then she proceeds to turn her modest dwelling upside-down. She moves the bedding and her few other possessions. With great care, not neglecting one square inch, she begins to sweep the dirt floor of her home. Over and over, she searches every corner. Every nook and cranny. She doesn't give up.

And at last, there it is! Her joy at finding what was lost can't be contained. It overflows. She *rejoices*. Calls friends and neighbors. Says "Come! Celebrate with me!"

For this precious coin has been hers since the beginning. So too, you are of immeasurable value to God because, from the beginning, you have belonged to God.

Our God who comes into the world through Jesus Christ. Our God who comes into the world through Jesus Christ—with a plan!

We hear about this plan in the Apostle Paul's first letter to his younger friend, Timothy. *The Message* translates it like this. "Here's a word that you can take to heart and depend on: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners." Jesus himself confirms it in this same Gospel of Luke, stating clearly that he's come "to seek out and to save the lost." That's his purpose. That's his mission.

Like a shepherd seeking out a lost sheep, like a woman looking for a lost coin, God in Christ Jesus searches unceasingly. Relentlessly. Tirelessly. Never giving up. Never stopping until the precious lost one has been found.

So today we've heard Jesus offering these two parables. Comparing this seeking, finding, saving God first to a disreputable shepherd and then to a humble housewife. How these words must have shocked his first hearers—those

Pharisees and scribes! Those churchy types who are more than a little self-righteous and judgmental of lost sinners.

But what do *you* think? Who's missing out? Whose pride is causing them to get left out in the cold?

And who's in the arms of Jesus? Who's in the embrace of the One who welcomes sinners? This Greek word translated *welcome* means bringing someone in, drawing them into one's arms. Embracing them. We're told that Jesus welcomes—embraces—the people that society rejects.

Jesus welcomes them and *eats* with them! In the first century and in our own time, too, sharing a meal and rejoicing so often go together. If you're celebrating, table fellowship is probably going to be a significant part of that celebration, an expression of that joy.

The gospels give us glimpses of Jesus feasting with outcasts. Eating with sinners. Now we know that we'll never get a more perfect portrait of God than the one we have in Jesus Christ. So when we envision Jesus sharing a meal with those outside the community of faith, we understand that what we're actually seeing is our God, hosting the best party ever. Rejoicing with—sinners!

Is this good news? That's a determination each of us has to make. When we think of *good news*, we think of the gospel. But the gospel message of Jesus seldom fails to surprise, to shock, even to scandalize—not only Pharisee and scribe, but you and me as well. The thing is, if we examine our hearts, do we find a bit of Pharisee in ourselves?

Could Jesus be talking to you and me today? Could he be talking to us church people who have played by the rules and haven't rocked the boat? Doesn't that count for something?

Do we ever feel just a little resentful that God cares so much about the lost? Do we ever wonder if God loves them more than God loves us? Do we ever begrudge God's amazing grace to others? Do we ever secretly hope that others get their just desserts? While at the same time desiring and even expecting mercy and grace for ourselves? Tragically, if we claim God's grace for ourselves only, we cut ourselves off from it.

My brothers and sisters, each one of us has been lost. We've *all* sinned. We've *all* fallen short. Each of us stands in need of repentance, in need of the turning back to God that we call repentance. We need to make this turn, this shift, this change of heart—not just once, but again and again.

But the need for repentance isn't what Jesus most wants us to hear today. At the end of both of these stories, he tells us that when the lost get found, heaven rejoices. What Jesus *really* wants you to remember is that when there is recovery, when there is redemption, when there is reconciliation, when there is restoration, our God delights! With a delight that can't be contained. With a delight that overflows. With a delight beyond imagining.

This God urges: *Come! Celebrate with me! You who have been found, share my love with those who are lost. You who are being saved, share my limitless grace with those who have yet to know it for themselves. You who have heard the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ, share that great good news with those who have not. And invite them, too, to celebrate with me!*

Beloved, when you celebrate with our God and with God's angels, you will be embraced. You will be welcomed into a party. You will rejoice and you will revel at a party to end all parties. The party at which heaven goes wild with joy!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.