## LOST BUT WORTH FINDING

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Catalog No. 1952 Luke 15:1-10 52nd Message Bernard Bell March 9, 2014

Among the best loved of all the parables in the gospels are the three in Luke 15: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son or the lost son. Less well-known is the context into which these three parables are told:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:1-2 ESV)

Two groups of people had differing reactions to Jesus. On one side were the tax collectors and sinners who "were all drawing near to hear him." On the other side were the Pharisees and scribes, standoffish and grumbling about Jesus' behavior. Trouble had been brewing for a long time, and the most contentious issue was table fellowship. The Pharisees did not like Jesus' choice of dining companions.

The Pharisees were the religious people of the day. They were serious about following God. They knew that in the past God had rightly judged Israel for its disobedience, its failure to keep his commandments written in the Torah, the Law which God gave through Moses at Sinai. The word Pharisee means one who is separated (perush); Pharisees separated themselves from sinners, but continued to live within society. How do you live a holy life when surrounded by unholy people? To avoid contamination they built fences around themselves. They sought to live at the same purity level as the priests on duty in the Temple. The Law did not require them to live this way, but it was their way of trying to be serious about living holy lives. The scribes were specialists in the rules and regulations the Pharisees sought to follow. They liked nothing better than coming up with new rules and regulations for living holy, safe, secure lives pleasing to God. Pharisaic Judaism developed into Rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the Temple, and into Orthodox Judaism today. Last Sunday, 300,000 haredim (ultra-Orthodox) marched in Jerusalem to declare that this really is how they want to live life, and to protest government efforts to bring them into the twenty-first century.

The Pharisees put boundaries around themselves. Beyond their boundaries were the sinners, whom they called "the people of the land" ('am-ha-'arets); they were the riffraff. Worst of all were the tax collectors. Today it is possible for an IRS agent to be a respectable member of society, even to be a church member. But in the gospels tax collectors were hated. They were collaborators with the Roman occupiers. A few days ago I went to see the Palestinian movie *Omar*, one of the five nominations for Best Foreign Film at last Sunday's Academy Awards. The movie depicts the tension and hostility faced by those suspected of being collaborators with the Israeli occupying forces.

But Jesus had a very different attitude to the tax collectors and sinners. He called Levi the tax collector to leave his tax booth and follow him. Levi did so, then went home and threw a great party so that all his tax collector friends could meet Jesus. The Pharisees and their scribes were not amused: they

grumbled at his disciples, saying, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (Luke 5:30-32)

The Pharisees were not party poopers, though we tend to think of them that way. They enjoyed a good feast; they enjoyed getting together for a leisurely meal with good intellectual discussion. Similar meals were also part of Greco-Roman society: the Greek symposium (from *sun-pinō*, drink together), the Latin *convivium* (from *convivere*, live together). A couple of times a year I get together with a few other pastors for a *convivium*: we sit around the dining table for several hours, enjoying a good meal and discussing a pre-designated topic.

The Pharisees enjoyed feasting, but they were very picky about their table companions. They did not want to be contaminated by impure people. Impurity was contagious: if a person who had not ceremonially purified himself sat next to you, you immediately contracted his impurity. I had a vivid illustration of this fear of contagious impurity fifteen years ago in Israel. We stayed six nights in a hotel by the Sea of Galilee. We were puzzled that some evenings coffee was available at the end of dinner, but other evenings it was not. One evening when it was not available one of our party really wanted a cup of coffee, so he went down to the bar and brought one up. He was not looking to cause trouble—he was a PBCC elder! But he caused lots of trouble! No sooner had he sat down than one of the wait staff rapidly approached in a state of agitation, and said, "You can't bring that in here." We were puzzled: what's wrong with a cup of coffee? Then it was explained to us. We had had meat for dinner. The coffee cup would have had milk in it at some time. The one dairy cup would have contaminated all the meat plates and cutlery in the dishwasher, rendering the whole dining hall contaminated and the whole hotel contaminated. The hotel would lose its kosher license, all because of one cup of coffee. That is how contamination works. The Pharisees were also picky about what food was served: they wanted to be sure that all food had been properly tithed. These Pharisaic concerns with tithing and ceremonial washing show up several times in the gospels.

Since Levi's feast, Jesus had been invited to three meals in the homes of Pharisees. The atmosphere at these meals was anything but convivial. In chapter 7, Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to a meal, but snubbed him on arrival: he did not show any of the customary gestures of a host welcoming a guest. Instead it was a woman, a sinner, who played the role of host, washing his feet with her tears, kissing them and anointing them. Jesus welcomed her touch. He rebuked Simon, "You didn't do...but she has done."

In chapter 11, another Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner, but was astonished that Jesus did not wash his hands before the meal. This

Ι

was not about hygiene, but about ceremonial purity. Jesus rebuked him, saying his priorities were all wrong:

"you Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness... you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God." (Luke 11:39, 42)

In chapter 14, a ruler of the Pharisees invited Jesus to a meal on the Sabbath. Noticing that the other guests chose the places of honor, Jesus told his host,

"when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind." (Luke 14:13)

To drive home his point he told the parable of the Great Banquet, where the master sent out his servant to bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame; when the servant replied that there was still room, he sent him out again so "that my house may be filled." God wants a full house at his banquet: a full house of poor, crippled, lame and blind; a full house of the last, the lost, the least and the dead.

What had the tax collectors and sinners learnt from these events? They had learnt that they were welcome in Jesus' presence, and so they "were all drawing near" to him. But the Pharisees again grumbled, just like they had over Levi's feast. But their grumbling has ratcheted up a notch: Luke uses an intensive form of the verb "grumbling." He will use this same intensive form again in chapter 19 after Jesus invites himself to the home of Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector. When the onlookers saw Zacchaeus welcome Jesus into his home,

## they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." (Luke 19:7)

This grumbling by the Pharisees and scribes has ominous overtones. Israel had a track record of grumbling. In the wilderness the Israelites grumbled about the lack of water to drink and food to eat; the Lord provided both water and food. They grumbled about the leadership of Moses and the Lord. They grumbled so much that the Lord let them wander around for forty years until they died. They failed to enter the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey, the land where they might eat in the Lord's presence. They missed out on the spread the Lord was providing for them.

Who is welcome in God's presence? Who is welcome at God's banquet, at his table? How should Jesus respond to show both the Pharisees and the sinners who is welcome? He doesn't give them a sermon. Instead he tells them a story, or rather three stories. "He told them a parable." The noun is singular but it covers all three parables because they are the same story. They share the same three-part structure: lost, found, party. The words *lose*, *find* and *rejoice* are used repeatedly in all three stories. Today we will look at the first two parables: the lost sheep and the lost coin. Two weeks will be spent on the much longer third parable, usually called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but better called that of the Lost Son(s).

## 1. The Lost Sheep (15:3-7)

So he told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninetynine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than

over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15:3-7)

As stories, parables are designed to draw in their hearers in a way a sermon never would. "What man of you, having a hundred sheep..."
Jesus draws his audience in. He invites them to imagine themselves in the story, to imagine themselves as a shepherd with a hundred sheep. But the Pharisees would have taken immediate offense. They could never imagine themselves as shepherds. As laymen, all Pharisees had a trade; but being a shepherd was an unclean occupation. No Pharisee would ever be a shepherd.

This shepherd has led his hundred sheep out into the open country. This is not the green pastures of Psalm 23, or of our window, or of an English meadow with the sheep kept in by hedges. The Palestinian countryside is rocky and hilly. The shepherd notices that one of the sheep is missing; he takes the blame: he has lost one of them. Jesus asks a rhetorical question: which one of you does not leave the ninety-nine and go after the lost one? Of course no one does not do this; of course anyone would go in search of the one lost sheep. The lost sheep is not able to find its way back to the flock; sheep are not clever animals! It must be found. Presumably the ninety-nine sheep are left in safety, perhaps in the care of another shepherd. The shepherd searches tirelessly, across the hilly, rocky terrain until he finds the sheep.

Last year in Turkey we were watching a shepherd with a flock of sheep. The flock moved on and a lamb got left behind, separated from its mother. It stood there bleating until the shepherd came back. The shepherd picked it up with one arm and carried it back to the flock. It was a cute picture. But a full-grown sheep is heavy, smelly and dirty. The shepherd in the parable puts it across his shoulders and staggers back. The sheep may be heavy, but his heart is full of joy—so full of joy that he goes home to share the good news. He calls together all his friends and neighbors and invites them to rejoice with him. The celebration is self-focused: "Rejoice with *me*, for *I* have found *my* sheep that was lost." It is the shepherd and his character that are celebrated. The shepherd did not give up until he found what was lost. He is a good shepherd.

How would the Pharisees and scribes have heard this parable? They would have resisted hearing this parable because of the shepherd. No shepherd would have ever been welcome in a Pharisee's presence, at their table. Yet it was to shepherds that the angels announced the birth of Jesus. But the Pharisees were caught in a bind. Their own Scriptures frequently used the metaphor of shepherd to describe leadership. Rabbinic literature apologizes for the use of this shepherd imagery in the Hebrew Scriptures! The Psalter celebrated David the shepherd-king:

He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds; from following the nursing ewes he brought him to shepherd Jacob his people, Israel his inheritance.

With upright heart he shepherded them

With upright heart he shepherded them and guided them with his skillful hand. (Ps 78:70-72)

David himself celebrated the Lord as his shepherd, notably in Psalm 23: The Lord's my shepherd. Israel found comfort and security in being the Lord's sheep, as was read in our call to worship:

Know that the LORD, he is God!

It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. (Ps 100:3)

Lost But Worth Finding

Or in the form I know it best, from the Scottish Psalter:

The Lord, ye know, is God indeed; without our aid he did us make; we are his folk, he doth us feed, and for his sheep he doth us take.

Israel's leaders were supposed to shepherd the people, but they had failed to do so, looking after their own interests instead. Several prophets rebuke these false shepherds, most fully in Ezekiel 34, a portion of which (vv 11-16) was read earlier. The Lord admonishes them:

"Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ... The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd... My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them." (Ezek 34:2-6)

So the Lord himself would shepherd his sheep, seeking the lost:

"Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down...I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice." (Ezek 34:II-I6)

The Pharisees were the self-proclaimed religious leaders of Israel. They were the gate-keepers, determining who was in and who was out. They would agree with Jesus about people being lost. The tax collectors and sinners were lost. But they had very different ideas of what to do with these lost sheep. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees:

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves." (Matt 23:13-15)

Or in Luke's version of the woes, delivered during the second meal:

"Woe to you lawyers also! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers." (Luke 11:46)

By contrast, Jesus gave this welcoming invitation:

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matt 11:28)

Jesus said,

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." (John 10:11)

The early church loved this image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. For the first few centuries of the church, the most popular image used to depict Jesus was the Good Shepherd, nearly always shown carrying a sheep across his shoulders.

## 2. The Lost Coin (15:8-10)

Jesus tells a second parable:

"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:8-10)

This second parable is shorter and the details are different: a woman instead of a man, inside the house instead of out in the open countryside, ten coins instead of a hundred sheep. But the storyline is the same: lost, found, celebration. The rhetorical question has the same structure: what woman does not search for the lost coin? Of course every woman would search for the lost coin. The woman is just as diligent in her search as was the shepherd. And when she finds the coin her reaction is the same. She calls together her friends and neighbors (the Greek makes it clear these are female friends and female neighbors). She invites them to celebrate with her. Again the party is focused on her: "Rejoice with *me*, for *I* have found the coin that *I* had lost." Like the shepherd, she did not give up her search until she had found what she had lost. The rejoicing celebrates her character.

The Pharisees would have had just as much trouble imagining themselves in this story. They lived in a male-centered world. No women dined at their table. No women shared table fellowship with them. No women were admitted to their brotherhood. The liturgy of daily morning prayer, written down in the second century, but dating orally to the first century, includes a prayer thanking God that one was not born a woman.

Luke did not share this view of women. He deliberately counterbalances these two parables, one featuring a man, the other a woman. This balancing of men and women is a distinctive feature of Luke's gospel. The angel Gabriel appears to both Zechariah and Mary, and each contributes a canticle: Mary's *Magnificat* and Zechariah's *Benedictus*. Simeon and Anna both see Jesus in the Temple. In chapters 13–14 Jesus heals first a woman and later a man on the Sabbath. There are many more such pairs. Luke always includes the women.

Yesterday was International Women's Day. Indeed, it was the hundredth anniversary of March 8 being International Women's Day. The Pharisees would not have been pleased with a day celebrating women. But Luke would be. His whole gospel celebrates women.

The two parables end the same way:

"Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance... Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:7, 10)

Just so, in the same way: there is a correspondence between heaven and earth. The response of the shepherd and of the woman in the two parables mirrors the response in heaven. There is joy "in heaven," joy "before the angels of God." Both are circumlocutions: it is God himself who rejoices when one sinner repent. What does it mean to repent? In both stories it simply means to be found. The sheep and the coin are lost; they can't find their way back. They can't bring about their own finding. But they are precious to their owner; they are valued and are worth finding. And so their owner diligently

searches for them until they are found. Ken Bailey describes repentance in these stories as "acceptance of being found." <sup>1</sup>

The tax collectors and sinners knew that they were lost. But they saw in Jesus one who had come looking for them. And so they all drew near to him. At the end of chapter 14 Jesus had said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (14:35). It was the tax collectors and sinners who drew near to hear. They knew that Jesus welcomed them and that he had gracious words of life for them. The words of Jesus brought life and inclusion; the words of the scribes and Pharisees condemned them to exclusion and death.

The Pharisees had also been listening. As Jesus left the second dinner.

the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say. (Luke 11:53-54)

But this just shows that they had ears which did not hear, eyes which did not see, and hearts which did not understand. They were false shepherds who cared neither for the sheep nor for the Good Shepherd who goes looking for the sheep.

Each Tuesday those who will be leading on Sunday meet to plan the service. I was not there last Tuesday, as John was scheduled to preach today. That evening I somewhat jokingly asked Sue if we were going to sing "There were ninety and nine that safely lay." This is a hymn I sang a lot in my childhood:

There were ninety and nine that safely lay
In the shelter of the fold;
But one was out on the hills away,
Far off from the gates of gold;
Away on the mountains wild and bare,
Away from the tender Shepherd's care.

This dates from the evangelistic campaigns of Moody and Sankey. Dwight Moody would preach and Ira Sankey would sing, accompanying himself on a portable organ. I didn't know the story behind this hymn, but after I agreed to preach today in place of John I decided to do some research. Thanks to Google Books I was able to read Sankey's own account.2 I found that the hymn was birthed in Edinburgh, my home city. At the end of an evangelistic message about the Good Shepherd, Moody asked Sankey, "Have you a solo appropriate for this subject, with which to close the service?" Sankey wrote, "I had nothing suitable in mind, and was greatly troubled to know what to do." He thought of singing the twenty-third psalm, but realized he couldn't possibly sing it as a solo: every Scotsman present would join him. This psalm, sung to the tune Crimond, is the best-loved hymn in all Scotland. Two days prior he had been struck by a poem in a paper he had been reading on the train, and had torn it out. He pulled out this scrap of paper and began to play and sing. A few days later he received a letter from someone telling him it was her sister who had written the poem. The poetess was Elizabeth Clephane, who also wrote Beneath the Cross of Jesus.

Here is the second verse:

"Lord, Thou hast here Thy ninety and nine; Are they not enough for Thee?" But the Shepherd made answer: "This of Mine Has wandered away from Me; And although the road be rough and steep, I go to the desert to find My sheep."

Moody was delighted with the song and it became a regular. At the laying of the cornerstone of a church he had Sankey stand on the cornerstone and sing this song, "as he hoped that this church would be one whose mission it would be to seek the lost ones."

How did Jesus and the Pharisees view tax collectors and sinners? In diametrically opposite manners. Later Jesus would tell the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt" (18:9). The Pharisees regarded sinners with disdain and contempt. They considered them to have no worth. Not so Jesus. He saw them as lost sheep in need of being found. They had great worth. They were worth searching for and finding, even at great cost to himself. God had sent him to be the Good Shepherd, to find the lost sheep and bring them home. It is the ministry of Jesus, welcoming sinners and tax collectors, that mirrors heaven, not the contempt of the Pharisees.

- 1. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 85.
- 2. Ira D. Sankey, *Sankey's Story of the Gospel Hymns* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times Co., 1906), 218-227.

© 2014 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino