

Exodus 32: 7-14  
I Timothy 1: 12-17  
Luke 15: 1-10

Lost, Sought, Found  
September 15, 2013  
Mary R. Brownlow

I must have counted them a hundred times...and there should have been 100 of them, including all the ewes and the new lambs. Finally I noticed the ewe standing all by herself, and at her feet, the small fleecy thing that was, one day ago, her only lamb. The lamb was certainly dead, but the ewe wouldn't move. She would nuzzle the little thing, and then just stand there, looking lost. And I had my hands full, literally. Tucked into my jacket was the latest addition to the herd: another new lamb, but this one had been rejected by its mother. And it would die without milk and a mother's care.

I knew what I had to do, but it wasn't pleasant. Luckily my dog was there to help. He got the ewe away to the other side of the field long enough for me to get hold of the little lifeless scrap of a thing. I took my knife and skinned it, then took some twine and tied the fleece to my little, still breathing lamb. Then I whistled to my dog and we went to the other side of the field so that the mother ewe could return without our immediate presence.

But we watched. We saw the ewe return to the place where she had left her lifeless infant lamb. We watched while she sniffed and nuzzled the fleece. We saw her find life where there had been death. She bonded with that new lamb, and both were saved. I know that sheep don't have expressions, and maybe not even emotions. But I swear I saw disbelief, happiness: a heavenly rejoicing in the way the two animals came to life.

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I couldn't believe that the coin was gone: one of my ten silver wedding coins. They are always together, tied so tightly on the web that holds my headdress together. It must have fallen off somewhere in the house, but it's so dark in here, even at noon, and with the dirt floor I can't hear a coin fall. I would have asked my neighbor to help me look, but I was too ashamed. She might think I had spent the coin, and that I'm just pretending it got lost.

It's true, I could use the money. These 10 silver coins were my dowry, though. They show that I was a respectable married woman. Now that my husband is dead, they are all I have left: the one thing that gives me some kind of pride and standing in the neighborhood. The one thing that reminds me of him. So my desperation had nothing to do with my next meal. The coin meant so much more than that. So I lit a lamp, so that a glimmer of the silver might flash as I swept.

The lamp did the trick. A flash of light, a flash of hope...then huge relief. Now I'll call my neighbors. We haven't had a celebration for a long time and I can't really afford a party, but maybe they will rejoice with me, and bring a little food and wine along too.

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Sheep and coins. Shepherds and women. Losing and finding. Little stories about little things that mean more than they seem. Jesus often spoke this way, his parables painting pictures, and

sometimes posing more questions than they answered. But we are people of another time, people of privilege and security, and so our “lost” and “found” may seem a little tame, our celebrations more muted.

What if we read these parables, or indeed other passages of Scripture, as though they were matters of life and death, and though they were matters of deep pain and deep joy? Certainly the events at Sinai were a matter of life and death for the Hebrew people. Paul’s transformation from a “man of violence” to a faithful servant of the Gospel was a matter of life and death for his former enemies and his present friends. It was a matter of life and death for the one lost sheep, as well as the other 99 who were left in the wilderness while the shepherd was on his search. And a coin, a single silver coin, may be a matter of life and death for many with no food, no home, no security.

These parables were prompted by something that turned out to be one of the most troublesome aspects of Jesus’ ministry: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Now, to us, we who do not worry much about a single meal or a single lost sheep or a single lost coin, this does not seem particularly problematic. But the way that Jesus zeroed in on the quality of “lostness,” whether someone was lost in the sense of sinful behavior, in the sense of illness, in the sense of ignorance, in the sense of exclusion, means that each person who heard him and watched him was forced into an assessment of their own place in the world.

The parables allow us to do a little role-playing. Do we want to be a shepherd? Then we get to feel worry and concern and perseverance, and ultimately, relief. Do we want to be the sheep? Then we get to feel panic and fear and loneliness. Or do we want to be friends and neighbors, and experience the empathetic relief that leads to celebration? The fact is, in none of these stories is there any room for someone to stand on the sidelines and grumble and complain.

I read the story of a seminary professor who assigned these parables for a Bible class discussion. They started by sharing their experiences of losing things. Of course there were the usual stories of lost keys or lost pets, but somehow the discussion seemed lifeless. The extravagant joy in the parables did not resonate with this class. That was in early September of 2001. The professor writes:

*A few days later, the attacks of 9/11 happened, and following them, there were news reports of posters and photos captioned with things like:*

*“LOST: MY WIFE SUSAN. SHE WORKED ON THE 93RD FLOOR OF TOWER #1”*

*and*

*“HAS ANYONE SEEN MY BROTHER MIGUEL?”*

*and*

*“OUR DADDY IS MISSING!”*

*All too rarely, there would be celebrations when someone was located. The armor of our privilege had been pierced, and suddenly we understood the parables. When the class met again the following week, our conversations about the text changed.”*

How do we experience “lostness?” How do we experience being found? We can’t get into the mind of the sheep (if there is such a thing as the mind of a sheep) or the mind of a coin. But we have all had experiences of grief, betrayal, anger, and selfishness that are isolating. God seeks to bring us out of that isolation and back into community. Our faith practices are structured to help us

with this. In our worship, when we pray the prayer of confession, does anyone feel that they are causing “joy in the presence of the angels of God?” You may not feel that, but there is some kind of divine rejoicing that mercy has been met with acceptance.

These stories are about more than shepherds and women and sheep and coins. They are about the welcoming posture of God, who accepts all whom others might reject. So, the stories are about us, but they are not limited to people sitting in prayerfully in pews. Jesus seems to be inordinately concerned with the ones who are **not** here. He would not be much interested in our institution, but he would be curious, I think, about our attitudes and our hearts.

If there is a running theme in these middle chapters of Luke, it would be banquets and celebration. Or maybe it would be simply “invitation.” We are invited to sympathize with and identify with the lost and the outcast. We are invited to search. We are invited to be found by divine mercy. And we are certainly invited to the party that follows. Amen.