

Once Lost, Now Found

Exodus 32:7-14, Luke 15:1-32 (ESV)

August 28, 2005

“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?” Here is the question in today’s reading. As seems to be the case throughout the Gospel according to Luke, the question points to the gospel, to the main emphasis of the passage. It does not matter that none of us own sheep. We can still appreciate the startling and even dubious strategy of leaving the ninety-nine which were not lost in the open country—not safe in the sheepfold, but still exposed in the open country—for the sake of finding the one. We can still sense the importance attached by that good shepherd to finding one lost sheep. We can still understand what is being asked: Who among you, if you have lost something valuable to you, does not go and look for it until you find it?

Now, just in case we missed that, Jesus repeats the question to his hearers in a slightly different form, and Luke faithfully records it for us to hear again: “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?” Again, this is the question in today’s reading. Its repetition confirms and elevates its importance. It does not matter that some of us are not women. All of us can appreciate the urgency of her loss. It does not matter that we do not use oil burning lamps with wicks. All of us can appreciate the diligence of her search. It does not mean that she did not treasure the other nine coins. But it does mean that she valued and treasured the one she had lost. We can still understand what is being asked even of us today: Who among you, if you have lost something valuable to you, does not go and look for it until you find it?

Given that this is the question being posed, what is the answer? What is the gospel toward which it points? How does it work? What does it mean? Why does he ask it? As is very often the case, the question functions at several levels, and it is important for us to hear each of these. The first level is a very simple request for information: Who among you, if you have lost something valuable to you, does not go and look for it until you find it? The answer, of course, then and now, is “No one.” That is the expected answer from the very way the question is written. No one fails to go and look for a valuable lost possession. If there were a failure to go and look, then by definition the lost possession must not have been very valuable. Some things are not worth looking for. The effort would be a waste of time. If, on the

other hand, the lost possession was valuable, then no one fails to go and look for it. If a shepherd let his lost sheep go, before long he would not have a flock. If a woman let her lost coin go, before long she would not have any coins. If a medical researcher let a lost experiment go, she would not find the cure for which she was looking. If a writer let a lost word go, he would not be able to express himself eloquently or powerfully. The initial point of the question is to have the crowd nodding in agreement: Yes, that is what we all do when we lose something valuable; we look for it until we find it.

The second level applies that directly to Jesus Christ. You agree, then, we can just hear him saying, that a shepherd looks for his lost sheep? Yes. You agree, then, that a woman looks for her lost coin? Yes, of course. Then open your eyes to what I am doing in your midst! Open your eyes to me! I am what my parables are about. I am what my question is about. We have to remember that today's reading began with accusations and complaints being made against Jesus. "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'" The argument here in the parables, unstated but obvious, is from the lesser to the greater. If you shepherds seek one, pitiful lost sheep, how much more am I going to seek tax collectors and sinners! If you women seek one lost coin, how much more am I going to seek tax collectors and sinners! That is to say, You understand the everyday illustrations, so apply them to me. I am the one who seeks and finds the lost, the lost people of the world, even tax collectors and sinners. Okay. That makes sense. It may not have convinced the ones complaining, and we will return to that in a moment, but at least the ones being sought and found probably liked it. Jesus is the one who seeks and finds the lost. That is why he received and even ate with sinners. That is probably not unrelated to why the authorities crucified him not too long after this.

Now, there is at least a third level of meaning to the question, and I want to get to that in just a moment. But we need to stay with this second level a little longer. It is not enough to say that Jesus is the one who seeks and finds the lost. He does that, of course, and the parables illustrate and illuminate his actions brilliantly. But this does raise another consideration. Why does he do this? Who is he? Did not his mother teach him to be careful about with whom he ate and with whom he associated? But, you see, to say that Jesus is the one who seeks and finds the lost is also to say that Jesus is the one to whom the lost belong. The seeking Jesus is the one to whom the tax collectors and sinners belong. The finding Jesus is the one to whom the Pharisees and scribes belonged, whether they liked it or not, whether they knew it or not. The seeking and finding Jesus is the one to whom you and I belong, yet today. This is the great truth toward which the question points. "It is he who

made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture” (Psalm 100:3b, c (ESV)).

You see, the argument from the lesser to the greater is not only from the sheep to the sinners or from the coin to the sinners but is also and even more so from the shepherd and the woman to the very Son of God. Jesus is not just anyone looking for sinners. A lot of people look for sinners. Some people want to help them sin more! Some people want to take lessons! Jesus looks for sinners not only to find them but also to rescue them, to bring them back to himself. Jesus looks for sinners in that he is the one to whom all sinners belong. He is the one to whom all people belong. That is to say, Jesus is God himself with us and for us. This is the sort of delayed impact of the second level of meaning of the question in today’s reading. Who among you, if you have lost something valuable to you, does not go and look for it until you find it? No one would fail to do that? Neither would I. That is why I am here looking for you. You belong to me. I am the Creator. I am also your Redeemer. That is what this is all about.

Now we are ready for the third level of meaning. And we will be helped in finding it by seeing how Jesus builds up to it. Do the math. To lose one sheep of one-hundred would be to suffer a one percent loss. To lose one coin of ten would be to suffer a ten percent loss. That is quite a jump. And I do not believe that I have ever appreciated that until this week. A dime, after all, is a silver coin, Losing one makes little difference. I never understood the big deal of this parable. But what if those ten silver coins were all that she had? The parable is not about pocket change. The parable is not about a coin collection. The parable is about her life savings. The one coin was ten percent of her capital, of all that she had. No wonder it was valuable. See how this concern is building?

Then we come to the third parable. “There was a man who had two sons.” And he lost one of them. Even at a crude, mathematical level we are up to a fifty percent loss, and we all know, of course, that when we are dealing with people we cannot even use such numbers. The loss is incalculable. The loss is too horrible to contemplate. The loss is too much to bear. Many of you, too many, have lost children. I know that. I grieve with and for you. And I do not mean to dwell on that today. But you know best of all the agony of this poor father. “There was a man who had two sons.” Suddenly we are not talking about sheep and coins anymore. We are talking about people. We are talking about loved ones. We are talking about children. We are talking about the hard realities of life and death. And we are still talking about the work of God in and through Jesus Christ.

If the first level of meaning is a simple request for information, and if the second level of meaning is an application to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, indeed an affirmation of his identity, divinity, and saving work, then the third level

of meaning comes back on the first hearers of these parables and therefore comes back on us yet today, raising the question of where we stand in relation to this seeking and finding Christ. Are we admitted lost and found sinners who enjoy his company and appreciate his table fellowship? Or are we the persistently lost righteous ones who disdain his guests and therefore reject even Christ himself? The stakes are high. Where do we stand? Where do you and I stand in relation to Christ?

Again, we can be helped by observing how the parables build in their description of the joy of finding the lost. First, “When he [the shepherd] 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.” Second, “When she [the woman] 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.” And then third, as if Jesus said, Let me show you what joy in heaven looks like, “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him... The father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.” Now that is joy in heaven! Who cares about the sheep or the coin anymore? Here we have hugs and kisses, robes and rings, eating and celebrating: “There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

And here is precisely where the point about our relation to Christ is made. No sooner has the one son come home than the other refuses to set foot in the house. “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.” That is to say, no sooner is the one son found than the other son is even more lost. “And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in.” And no sooner is the second son lost than the father leaves the party and goes looking for him. “His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’” Now, that is a loving father, seeking and finding the lost. Indeed, the

great, good news in our reading today is that the relentless love of God pursues us, seeks us out, and always finds us, no matter where we are, no matter how far away we have run, no matter how far down we have fallen, no matter how well we have hidden, no matter how very much we think we do not want or need to be found. The love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord pursues us, seeks us out, and always finds us. Where are we in all of this?

Was there a big party for the prodigal son who repented? Yes, no doubt about it. But I do not think that is the main point of the story. The first parable was about the shepherd finding the sheep, not about the sheep finding its way home. The second parable was about the woman finding the coin, not about the coin jumping back into her purse. And even though this third parable surely illustrates the joy of heaven, it is not, finally, so much about the one son coming home as it is about the father looking for his other son, even the one who was lost right there at home. So, let us not glory in our own repentance or even in our supposed strength to repent. Instead, let us glory in God who seeks us out and always finds us. Note that the parable ends without telling us how the situation ends. Or, I should say, the parable ends with the older brother still standing outside. And yet, his father is with him, so he is not alone. I suppose there would be a way to hear this strange parable as a reprimand. But that would miss the point. This is, instead, a wonderfully gracious invitation. Jesus is saying to each of us, Come into the house. Come to the table. Come to the party. It is not complete without you. Enter into the joy of heaven.

So I ask us all again, “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?” “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?” Who among you, if you have lost something valuable to you, does not go and look for it until you find it? Even so, do you not know how much more, in and through Jesus Christ, God Almighty is looking for you? Were we not once lost? Are we now found?

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org