SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 14 – Proper 19 (C)

Rejoice in the Finding
[RCL] Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

In these parables, we almost always look at the lost sheep or the lost coin. We imagine ourselves as the one lost and Jesus leaving all the others to find us. Or perhaps we imagine ourselves as part of the obedient flock, the ones who stay put. Sometimes we might even imagine we can point a finger at the wayward sheep – able to see exactly who the troublemaker is, sure that we know who Jesus is needing to run after. This time, though, consider a different part of the parable: Jesus phrases the question to his followers as a no-brainer – as obvious – but let's take a minute to actually look at what he's asking.

"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" Ummm... me? Me, Jesus. I don't do that. Do you? Think of what Jesus is actually saying: He suggests it's clear that any one of us would leave our ninety-nine happy, healthy, obedient sheep – in the wilderness, no less – to go after the one who was probably always a pain in our backside anyway.

Honestly, would we even notice that one went missing?

His next question is similar: "What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?" Now, I'm not sure why this one is specific to women – but again, we all might answer, "Me." We would probably not search the house for one missing coin.

Now, there's much to be said for having an abundance mindset, for looking at the things we do have and feeling gratitude for the many ways God has blessed us. That is one part of stewardship – a very important part. But today's parable asks us about the other part of stewardship: What do we have responsibility for, and how do we take care of what we have?

Jesus presumes that we would leave nine good coins or ninety-nine good sheep to look for the one that has been lost. And yet, do we?

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Sometimes, our abundance mindset leaves us thinking that we should leave well enough alone. And, at times, there is wisdom in that. But here, Jesus is giving us a very different message – one that says every single individual is important.

It's not enough to have a church with an Average Sunday Attendance of ninety-nine. Where is the one missing? Go out and find them! Without that one (or those ones), our pews are not complete.

It's not enough to have a loose idea of where you spend your money each month. Track it and find out if there are coins going missing – if you're missing money you should have or getting double charged for something, go find that missing piece!

The place where this strikes home perhaps even more viscerally is in our care for creation. There are so many species we have lost to extinction – feathered beings, furred beings, plant beings, whole species wiped out due to climate change or loss of environment. And we can become callous to it, numb to the disappearance of these beautiful beings.

Jesus is pointing us toward something really important, something we ourselves have lost. He is pointing us toward **joy**. When we don't look for the lost thing, or maybe don't even realize something has been lost, we lose a chance to rejoice in the finding. When we leave well enough alone, we don't just deprive the herd of their missing friend; we deprive ourselves as well.

In both parables, the one who is lost is searched after because it's understood how important that missing piece is. It's understood that the flock isn't the same without the one, and that each coin is needed and important. Often, the importance of an individual – the importance of one – is overlooked. We imagine that we'll get along fine with one missing, or that another will come to fill its place. But Jesus isn't like us in this way. He loves with a specificity that doesn't accept substitutions. Jesus loves you, individually. And her. And him. And each one of us.

And that love is what brings him to seek us out, each one. He calls us into loving one another such that we might do the same: seeking out that which is lost until it is found again and brought back. In both of these parables, when those who are lost are found, there is a huge celebration. The one who finds his missing sheep "calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'" Likewise, the woman who finds the missing coin "calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'" There is a huge communal aspect to these stories and to this celebration – it's not a "finders-keepers, losers-weepers" situation. Instead, this is a joy that grows through sharing. The joy of the finder is multiplied by the community that shares in the celebration.

This pointing us to joy, then, is not only something we are doing individually but something we are doing together. Our joy is not just for us, but for our whole community to join.

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These days, joy can feel hard to come by. And so, the celebration and rejoicing that we can partake of and share with one another takes on an even greater importance. We celebrate and rejoice as a form of resistance, as a form of praise, as a living prayer. Our joy doesn't belong to us alone, but to our whole community – to our friends and neighbors, as much as us.

This morning, we are invited to again consider these well-worn, well-loved parables. We are invited to see ourselves as the finders – to remember the joy of finding that which is lost, and to remember the joy of sharing our delights with our neighbors. Perhaps we are neither lost nor found, but reminded of the importance of the finding. And hopefully, we are reminded of God's joy. Amen.

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