

Luke 15:1-10
Romans 12:9-18

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and 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.

"Or 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? 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 in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

"Why are we here?" is the question of this season at First Pres – our way of provoking a Lenten process of re-orientation to the stars we steer by in our spiritual and moral life together. We certainly didn't anticipate the degree of dis-orientation that these weeks would deal out to us, or how they'd stretch the meaning of the word "here" as we try to discern our way through such a changed landscape on our way from winter into spring. We've been sharpening the edge of the question *Why are we here?*, week by week through this Lent, with observations about our church that come from a leadership retreat back in the fall. We've said that we come here longing for wholeness – having learned, just by living, something about brokenness; and we've said that we come here *looking for ways to move onward* – having learned, just by living, something about being stuck. We've said that we come here *hoping to find something we can trust* – having learned, just by living, about the prevalence and power of doubt and fear. And today we add that we come here *searching for community and hospitality* – having learned, just by living, something about alienation and being lost.

All that searching that we're doing, in coming here together, makes the little pair of parables in the 15th chapter of the gospel of Luke shine like two particularly bright stars in the Lenten firmament.

The one about the shepherd who leaves a flock of 99 sheep to search for a single stray also appears in the gospel of Matthew (18:12-14). But the one about the woman who turns her house upside down looking for a lost coin, such a perfect match with the other one, is in Luke alone – which makes you wonder if Luke thought it might be helpful to us to see the situation in stereo, through the lenses of both genders, for the point to really hit home. The pair of stories does help us to see with more depth, the way having a pair of eyes does – because, as accustomed as we are to thinking of our spiritual life

as a journey we undertake in search of something, and as much as we tend to like to think of ourselves, religiously, as seekers, actually I think these parables are trying to tell us, together, that whatever it may be that we think we're looking for, actually we are the ones being sought. Actually we are, not lost, but found.

Jesus told his parables for an audience of legalists and religious snobs who were quite scandalized by the kind of company Jesus was keeping. From their point of view, the people who were flocking to Jesus were the kinds who shouldn't have felt they belonged at the table with any upstanding member of the community: "All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him," Luke says. But these were, of course, exactly the kinds of people that Jesus was setting the table for. The kind of people who knew that they were lost; the kind of people with ears to hear who came to use them because they knew that Jesus was offering them a way to belong – that Jesus could heal what was broken in them, could help them get unstuck, could give them something trustworthy.

They were people, we're meant to understand, without whom the community was, and is always, incomplete. They are people without whom the rest of us are not a whole human family. They might well think that they're lost - 'lost', that is, in the sense of disoriented, not quite sure where they are. But the parable wants us to understand that they're actually 'lost' in the sense of 'the ones being sought'. They are the ones for whom the Good Shepherd will leave the rest of the flock in order to go looking for them and bring them back; the ones for whom the good woman householder will turn the house upside down in order to find. These parables are good news for the tax collectors and sinners who come near to hear – good news for the likes of us if, like the sinners, our record is hardly perfect as far as loving God and neighbor is concerned or if, like the tax-collectors, our hands are hardly clean as far as complicity in the systems that diminish other people is concerned. The good news is that someone has noticed that we're missing and, we can be sure, has set a place for us and then set off to find us. And don't miss the fact that both parables end in the spilling out of celebration: neither the shepherd nor the woman householder can contain their joy in finding what was lost – and the story of the losing, the seeking, the finding is not complete until it includes the rejoicing.

That joy, of course, is the primary message Jesus is trying to communicate to his audience of Pharisees and scribes. Luke says that they've been grumbling very publicly about their disapproval of the generosity of Jesus' message; so Jesus makes sure that the joy that follows the return of the lost ones spills out in an equally public way. The destination of this movement, Jesus says, is not the private satisfaction of scrupulous religious observance – even if that has its own rewards. No – the destination of this movement is a festival to welcome everyone home. If you can't rejoice in the finding of the lost, if you can't feel the elation that greets the return of the one who strayed, then perhaps you are lost yourself – in which case, know that someone is likely to set off looking for you, to bring you back home.

This week while I was pondering the lost sheep and the lost coin, I felt a vague stirring in my memory and went to try to track it down in the little notebook where I've written lines, paragraphs, scraps of other people's words whose light I've spotted on pages here and there over the years. When I traced my way to the fragment I had in mind, I found that I was remembering a few lines from a poet named Paulette Roeske, in a poem called "The Absence of Edges"; here they are –

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...for the first time
the world felt complete
as if I were the found piece
of the largest puzzle,
consoled at last
by the absence of edges ¹

The long-awaited consolation of the absence of edges ... the sense of somehow belonging to the largest puzzle, perhaps even without a sense of exactly where or how ... and, most of all, the yearning to be found... It was startling to find all those words on an almost-forgotten page, waiting to be read now in a world where the whole picture of the largest puzzle seems so suddenly to have become clouded by fear and danger, a world where the touching of the pieces suddenly seems threatening. How much more poignant is the longing to be found now, in a time when we are told that our lives may depend on the attention we pay to the edges between us. How much more urgent is the hope that someone is coming to search for us.

Each of Jesus' two little stories promises that the protagonist notices what's missing, and pines over it, and sets off to look for it; and the end of the search, we're told, is communal rejoicing as the found one comes home. But I think the story we're living now bids us to think more deeply into the quality of joy that's likely to be waiting for us beyond this valley of the shadow whenever we get to the home we've longed for. By the time we get there, it'll be a joy that will have known, not only physical danger but moral danger: it will have had to look unblinkingly at the horrifying cost of thinking that you can sort people into more deserving and less deserving. It'll be a joy that will have had to use its ears to listen for the difference it makes to tell the truth, and the damage it does to lie. It'll be a joy that, in order to find its way home, will have to turn its back on a thousand opportunities to indulge the instinct of greed, and shield its tender lungs from the infection of believing that care is a finite resource, or that empathy is a sign of weakness. It'll be a joy that knows more than we thought we could ever know about how precious every breath is, every touch. It's a joy that's grounded in clear-eyed caring for each other, clear thinking about what it really means to live as neighbors.

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In his letter to a community of followers of Jesus, in Rome, who were trying to live with that kind of clarity and that kind of joy, Paul wrote –

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with

¹ Paulette Roeske, "The Absence of Edges," in Breathing under Water (Urbana, IL: Stormline Press, 1988).

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one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

This – I think he was saying to them, and is saying to us – this is how it will be when you arrive at last in that place of rejoicing. This is what you have to look forward to. This is the whole picture – with its memories of edges, but with everyone found at last. This home, when we get there, will undo our aloneness with the recognition that our togetherness is far more intricate, far more demanding, far more risky – and far more glorious – than we had ever had reason to realize before.

Even now, the woman of the house is checking every corner, every crack, every shadow. The Shepherd has set a place for us; and as far as we may have strayed – as dark and weary as the land may be where we have wandered – even so, the Shepherd has gone to find us –

*Come home, come home – ye who are weary come home –
Earnestly, tenderly Jesus is calling – calling, O sinner, come home! ²*

And when he has hoisted us up onto his shoulders and bounced us back home – when we get there – the joy of that place is not simple; but it is real: a clear-eyed joy. And, in it, each of us belongs. In it, every lost one of us is home. In it, each of us begins again, and we all begin again together.

Which is part of why we're here.

**The Rev. Richard E. Spalding,
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² This refrain is from a well-known and much-loved hymn, written and composed in 1880 by Will L. Thompson (1847-1909). It was sung at this moment in the sermon.

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