

Seeking and finding

Luke 15: 1-10

It is unfortunate that I am preaching to you lot today as I have preached to you on these parables before. If I had been down at St B's I could probably got away with a re-use. But then again, probably not, things need to be fresh, don't they? The problem I faced was that the previous sermon was in my head, so I sought some ideas from elsewhere and found a fresh idea in some writings by a Hawaiian minister by the name of Jazzy Bostock. And so, I started there.

We have two Jesus parables in our Gospel reading today: the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of lost coin. They are very well known and like a sheep I could have wandered down a well-worn path in exploring them.

When we think about these parables, we almost always look at them from the perspective of 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, let us 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?” Hmm, this is trickier than it first appears: he is not asking whether he goes searching for the lost, He is asking do you/I go looking for the lost. Do you? Do I? Think of what Jesus is actually asking: He suggests it is 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 anyway. Or would be if they joined our community!

Honestly, would we even notice that one who went missing?

Now, there's much to be said 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?

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 is 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.

At our bible study group this week we reflected on the image that the Christian community can be seen as a body with all its bits, muscles and tendons, feet and eyes. And all these bits need to be present and working if we are to function as we should. Metaphorically, it's not much good if the person who is to be the Achilles tendon, as it were, of our community is missing and the rest of us are left to limp along as best we can.

The place where this challenge strikes home perhaps even more viscerally is in our care for creation. There are so many species we have lost to extinction – feathered and furred creatures, tiny jumping spiders, beautiful kinds of orchids,

whole species wiped out due to climate change or loss of environment. Like with the missing sheep we can become tired of all the fuss after all there are plenty of other orchid species, and we become callous to its loss; numb to the disappearance of these beautiful forms.

At the end of the parables, Jesus is pointing us toward something really important, something we ourselves may have lost. He is pointing us toward *joy*. When we do not 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 group of its missing friend; we deprive ourselves as well. When a species or a person disappears forever, we have lost a special kind of beauty, of a unique way of being that can never be found anywhere else.

In the parable, the one who is lost is searched for, because it's understood how important that missing piece is. It is understood that the flock isn't whole/ complete/ fully functional without that one; it is needed and important. Further we are not whole/ complete/ fully functional without them. Often, the importance of an individual – the importance of one – is overlooked. We imagine that we will get along fine with one missing, or that another will come to take their place. But Jesus is not like us in this way. He loves with a specificity that does not accept substitutions. Jesus loves you, individually. And her. And him. And each one of us. Each one of us is unique and fills a special place no one else can fill.

And that love is what brings him to seek us out, each one of us. 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 neighbours, 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 neighbours, 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.

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 does not belong to us alone, but to our whole community – to our friends and neighbours, 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 seekers, and finders – to remember the joy of finding that which is lost, and to remember the joy of sharing our delights with our neighbours. Perhaps we are neither lost nor found, but reminded of the importance of our finding. And hopefully, we are reminded of God’s joy when we are found. Amen