

March 7 – Luke 15: Lost and Found

All three of our stories today deal with something lost. A coin...a sheep...and a son. We usually interpret all three parables as being about lost people...and God rejoices when they are found.

But what does it mean to be lost? And what then does it mean to be found? According to the first two parables, it's when a sinner repents. There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.

Then, in the third parable the wayward son is the embodiment of that sinner who repents. A son repents and returns home. An overjoyed father reacts with extravagance...foolish extravagance even. His love for his son is so great, he can't respond with restraint. That kind of love is not afraid to look foolish.

But still, who are the lost?

In some Christian traditions, the lost are those who don't verbally and usually publicly accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Others might say it's those who've abandoned the church, or abandoned their faith.

Often we consider the lost those whose lives have literally gone off the rails in the same way as the younger son.

If you go to some of the big Christian conferences, you'll hear stories like that. The speaker tells his or her story about bad choices and a downward spiral into debauchery and selfish living. Then something happens that wakes them up. They come to Jesus and everything turns around.

I've not been to too many of those conferences but it seems like at the ones I have, some of the speakers really have to stretch and work a bit to come up with something bad enough in their life to qualify as that repentant sinner that God celebrates. It's like you can't really be found unless you're really far lost.

Then there's the older son. What about him? He's been faithful to his father all these years. He's followed all the rules. He doesn't believe he's lost. And those of us who relate more to him than the younger brother might not either.

But when his brother returns, he does not react with the joy his father does. He's resentful and jealous. Turns out he's every bit as lost as the younger brother was.

Reading the parables this time, I was struck by a couple of different things I hadn't really paid much attention to before. First, the parables are all three an answer to the complaints and grumbling of the pharisees and scribes. They are incensed that Jesus would eat with "those people" – the tax collectors and sinners.

The second thing I paid more attention to this time through is the intensity of the search in the first two and the extravagance of the celebration in all three.

So let's look at the sheep first – what shepherd wouldn't go and look for the one who was lost? I don't know much about sheep tending, but it seems kind of risky to leave the 99 and go look for the one. Apparently that one sheep matters that much.

But throwing a party? Because you found a sheep? Really?

And then there's the coin. What woman having lost a coin worth a lot wouldn't turn their home upside down to find it. OK, this one I can answer. As someone who commonly loses things – sometimes things like checks and credit cards – yes I have turned my house and my car upside down to find something I lost.

But throw a party? Invite friends over to celebrate because you found a coin...or your missing credit card...or maybe your bitcoin password? I mean, it seems a little extravagant...foolish even.

But of course extravagant and foolish is exactly how the father acted when he glimpses his son far off in the distance. He doesn't think, he just takes off, running, with joy and abandon to greet his son. Foolish, anyone who saw the scene may have said.

And he didn't even know yet that the son wanted to repent. For all he knew the son was coming to ask for more money.

His joy was purely because his son, once dead, is now alive.

In his joy, he too throws an extravagant party. Lots of celebrating in these parables. This party might make a little bit more sense to us. If I thought someone I loved was dead and they return alive, I'd be overjoyed.

But for some of us, that joy might be mingled with something else. Our reaction might be more like the older brother. Why all this fuss over a son who decides to do what he should have done all along...what his older brother has done all along.

I think that the older brother becomes the key to all of these parables...because he points back to the scribes and pharisees. Remember it's their remarks that set the context for these parables.

The scribes and pharisees are wondering why Jesus would want to celebrate with all the worst people in their culture..." those people."

Why would he sit at their tables and share their food? Why would he celebrate with them when there's really nothing about them worth celebrating?

But here's the thing – Jesus ate with Pharisees, too. He shared meals with them...meals with good food, wine, maybe some story-telling and laughter...joy. He celebrated with them, too.

Jesus celebrates when connections are made to others no matter who they are. And the reality is, the Pharisees and scribes are as much in need of repentance as the tax collectors and sinners. They just don't know it.

Either way, God celebrates.

When someone's life has gone way off the rails...when they've descended into a quagmire of substance abuse, gambling, and unhealthy sexual activity...and then they wake up and change course, God is ready to throw a party.

But if the bitter, resentful older brother also welcomes his brother and joins the party, God celebrates that, too.

When good religious people, like the Pharisees, welcome those tax collectors and sinners at their own tables, God celebrates that.

When we reach out to connect with someone who we regard as one of "those people" God celebrates.

When we let our resentments and jealousy go and welcome our brothers and sisters, God celebrates.

When we offer forgiveness and reconciliation to another...or ask for it from them, God celebrates.

When we take a few minutes from a crazy busy life and sit down longing for connection with God, God celebrates.

I think God even celebrates the doubter...the one who's rejected religion and maybe even God. When that doubter steps out into a starlit prairie night or stands on a mountain top or ocean shore and feels an intense connection to something beyond himself, God celebrates, because by whatever name we might use, if we use a name at all, that something is God.

If the shepherd, the woman, and the father all represent God, then God is one who celebrates...God celebrates reunion – reconnection...in whatever form that takes.

One of the changes that came about as the result of Martin Luther and the Reformation is a new understanding of repentance and penance.

The Church had developed a whole penitential system to restore wayward Christians. There were actions to take, indulgences to buy, steps to crawl up, pilgrimages to make. There is still that sense in the Catholic church that people need to “do penance...” take some sort of action to show their sorrow for sin and be forgiven.

But Luther said that repentance is no single act. It's how we live. Living a life of repentance means continually turning toward God...in prayer, in worship, in contemplation, in confession. Living a life of repentance means repeatedly turning towards the one who longs to celebrate with us.

And it means rejoicing when God celebrates others – even, no especially – the ones we think don't deserve it.

God is willing to look be extravagant...foolish even. Because that kind of love is not afraid to be foolish.