

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
September 11, 2022 – The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Luke 15:1-10  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning's lesson from Luke includes two parables, the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin. There is a third parable that immediately follows today's lesson, the more famous Parable of the Prodigal Son. All three parables are presented by Luke as lessons about human sin and repentance and divine mercy and forgiveness.

The context of these parables is important. Some of the religious leaders – Pharisees and scribes – were grumbling because Jesus had been eating with tax collectors and sinners, people held in contempt by Jewish people who were faithful to God's teaching. Some of these people "were coming near to listen to Jesus." We may imagine the tension in Jesus' audience, the way the religious people and the sinners would group themselves separately. Jesus tells these parables to illustrate the point he made explicitly to the chief tax collector named Zacchaeus: "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). If you have ever wondered why people in positions of religious power were deeply offended by the teaching of Jesus, so offended that some of them joined together to do him great harm, then pay attention to the Gospel lessons we have been hearing. Jesus did not win friends among the Pharisees and scribes with these parables!

Both the shepherd who loses one of his hundred sheep and the woman who loses one of her ten coins search diligently for what is lost. And once they find the lost sheep and the lost coin, they rejoice and celebrate with their friends and neighbors. The celebrations in Jesus' parables show us the value to the shepherd and the woman of what was lost. After telling these two short parables Jesus says, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." When we equate the shepherd and the woman with God, as these words lead us to do, we may understand how important each sinner – each person – is to God, and that is good news for all of us sinners! As church historian Roberta Bondi wrote in reference to the teachings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers in the early church, "God is always so much more willing than human beings to make allowances for sin, because it is God alone who sees the whole of who we are and who we have been, who understands the depths of our temptations and the extent of our sufferings" ("Memories of God: Theological Reflections on a Life," page 71). And as the hymn we just sang, "There's a wideness in God's mercy," puts it: "For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind." Thanks be to God for God's mercy and love!

In her book about the parables, "Short Stories by Jesus," Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine invites us to look at these two parables from a different angle, seeing the shepherd and the woman as human figures, not as God. The shepherd lost his sheep, and the woman lost her coin. They each had a problem for which they were responsible – a missing sheep and a missing coin – and they fixed it by searching diligently for what they had lost.

Levine points out that to Jesus' audience the shepherd who owned one hundred sheep and the woman who had ten coins in savings would be seen as quite well-off in a worldly sense. Less well-off people – a shepherd who owned only three sheep or a woman with only two coins in savings – would easily notice if one were missing. Both would naturally search diligently for what was lost. Those who have little know and value what they have. But for those who have much, the first challenge is to notice what is missing. How could you notice that you have 99 instead of 100 sheep or 9 coins instead of 10 without paying attention and counting carefully?

Let's place ourselves in these parables. Imagine that we are the shepherd and the woman, people who have much in a material sense. Then imagine that what is missing is not a small part of what we own, but God. In other words, look at these parables not as if God were searching for us, but as if we were searching for God. Our first task is to notice that God is missing. When we are well off in a material sense, when life is going well for us and we can rely on ourselves and our families, friends, and strangers to provide us with all we need, we may not notice that God is missing. We may become complacent and lazy about spiritual matters – prayer and worship, holy reading, and acts of charity and mercy. Then when we lose something very valuable and are beyond human help, we call on God for help. You know how people flooded to churches after the terrorist attacks twenty-one years ago. This seems to be “human nature,” noted often in the Bible and still observable in ourselves and others.

The Gospel challenges us to examine ourselves and our lives and to look at the truth. First of all, how present is God in our lives? Does God get much of our attention? Is God as valuable to us as one sheep out of a hundred or one out of three or as valuable as our entire flock? When we decide how to spend our lives – our time, talent, and treasure – how much does it matter to us to compare our choices to what God wants? Do we actually seek God diligently, wherever God may be found?

Many people seek and find God in creation. In this Season of Creation let's think for a few moments about what we believe regarding God and creation, beginning with a review of some basic ideas from theology that are generally accepted in our Anglican tradition.

Almost every Sunday we join together in affirming our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed. We begin with the assertion that God is the “maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.” This is a religious affirmation about our relationship to God, that we are finite beings whose very existence is a gift from God. “It is [the Lord] who has made us and not we ourselves” as the psalmist declares (100:3). This religious affirmation does not preclude or compete with a scientific understanding of the natural world. Science and theology do different things, and we can embrace both.

In church we speak theologically. Last week I read Archbishop Tutu's story of creation from his “Children of God Storybook Bible.” You may remember how it began – “In the very beginning, God's love bubbled over when there was nothing else.” No one would assert that “bubbling over love” is a viable scientific explanation of the beginning of life. But theologically this lovely metaphor is entirely consistent with ideas we accept: God freely created all there is; God is loving and generous and gives life to others; God lets others live alongside and in fellowship with God; God is good, and creation is good.

Theologians now regard creation not as something that happened long ago, in a moment of time, but rather an ongoing creative work of God's love still sustaining the cosmos. As some have pointed out, one way of understanding this is to see that, for the universe to come to an end, it is not necessary for God to *do* something; God only needs to *stop* doing something. God's creative work continues in our world from day to day, minute to minute. We have a choice – to work alongside God, and thereby to cooperate in the act of creation; or to try to undermine creation, to thwart or undo it, for our own selfish purposes.

Last Sunday we heard God speak to Moses in these words: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life” (Deuteronomy 30:19). May we choose life for ourselves and for God's creatures and creation, for the love of God and to God's glory, today and always. Amen.