

“Lost, and driving 256 extra miles”  
Sermon given 9-14-10  
Immanuel Lutheran Church  
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**Luke 15:1–10**

*Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.]<sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup>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? <sup>5</sup>When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <sup>6</sup>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.' <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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? <sup>9</sup>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.'<sup>10</sup> Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

When was the last time you lost something and went in search for it with a sense of desperation, going through the car, the closet, the office, the kitchen... looking and looking again and again, then becoming exasperated. We search for the things we lose because they are of value to us. Be it a child, a ring, a cell phone, a wallet, or a car, we know the joy, the relief, and feelings we experience when we find them, even if it is just for a moment. I grew up with and experienced with others what is known as the “contact generation”. Hard contact lenses were difficult to wear, and more difficult to find when they fell out. A basketball game would come to a screeching halt, a party would stop, and everyone would be on the court or the floor after the words... “I lost my contact, don’t move...” Then there is a sense of relief to the words, “I found it.”

The 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Luke could be described as the “Lost Contact” stories. We hear two of them this morning, the lost sheep and the lost coin. The other two are in the story of the Prodigal, the lost son and the lost brother. Many theologians call this chapter “the Gospel within the Gospel” because it is a chapter of contrast between the Pharisees and Scribes as the religious authorities as judgmental religious leaders and Jesus whose portrays the heart of God.

Our Gospel opens the “tax collectors and sinners coming near to listen to this Jesus”. It is important for you to have a clear picture of Luke’s notion of “sinner”. On the one hand we say we are all sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God... this is a given. But, for Luke, Jesus clarifies those righteous who have no need of repentance (in 15:7), and Jesus embracing the sinners who the religious leaders reject. Jesus is not going after them; they are coming to him because he has something to say and eats with them. Jesus crosses a big boundary between the clean and the unclean.

As you know, the Pharisees and scribes were the good religious folk of the day. They worshipped regularly, tithed, and did good things. They just had one major flaw, they couldn't see the log in their own eye. They were blinded their own religious arrogance and judgment. So, Jesus does the normal thing by responding with a story, a parable, in fact four parables on being lost. He drives the point home not just about the lost being found, but the inability of others to celebrate and have joy.

These parables are for us, the faithful, whose joy of living in the kingdom of God has grown dim. These parables are for you, you who feel as if you are going through the motions. As someone said, "knowing the price of everything but the value of nothing." These stories are for us to reclaim the joy of knowing what the elder brother forgot when his father said, "all that I have is yours" as a response to the statement "You never gave me a party."

Jesus responds to the religious leaders saying, "Imagine you have a hundred sheep" (none of them would individually own a hundred sheep, 100 sheep is a process of collective/communal farming) and you lose one of them, now wouldn't you go after the lost until you found it? No! You wouldn't do this! You would cut your losses and move on, this is a stupid idea! And when you find the lost sheep, Jesus doesn't say a word about going back to the 99. No, he goes home (Luke writes) inviting his neighbors to rejoice. Fr. Capon, in *Parables of Judgment* sees the 99 as a set up, with two groups, the 99 who never get lost and the 1 who does. The 1 represents the whole human family. Capon makes the case with the question, "did you ever meet 99 people who have no need of repentance?" Jesus says there is more joy in heaven over the 1 sinner who repents over the 99 righteous. So, how many righteous people do you know who have no need of repentance? On some level, we are all in this together. Before you jump to the conclusion of being at least a repentant sinner, know this is a self justification trick.

If this story were literal, the sheep would have been half dead or half eaten by the time the shepherd found the lost one. Would the Shepherd have chastised the sheep, lectured the sheep, preached to the sheep, or pick the sheep up like a mother would pick up a lost child in the mall -with joy? None of us like being compared to anything that is lost. The Newspaper this week revealed that men drive 256 more miles a year than women because when they are lost, they don't want to ask for directions. Now that is a good ad for Garmin! Who wants to admit they are lost? Who can acknowledge they are lost? You won't and you can't until you are truly desperate. Does anyone here feel "lost" this morning? I know you are going to drive around the block for 256 extra miles till you find yourself. The closest we get to admitting we are lost is when we used to say "I am trying to find myself... my true self." Call me, when you do.

Jesus doesn't just make his point with the lost sheep, he tells another parable about a lost coin. A peasant woman, a house without windows (she has to light a lamp), in search of a lost coin, sweeps the house clean, searches until she finds it. Now, the coin she is seeking would probably be equivalent to what a farm hand would make in a day. It was probably a dowry coin with 9 other coins made a headdress given to her on her wedding day, and no court or husband could take it from her. (Jeremias, 1963, 133) If this were the case, then it would be like

you misplacing your wedding ring and searching the house, car, garage, office, bathroom diligently until you found it. It would be more sentimental than economical; nonetheless she calls her neighbors to rejoice with her. Did they? Would we? Probably not.

So, where does this leave us? Something is missing. Sheep get lost but don't repent. A coin doesn't wander off but is lost by the owner. The notion of repentance by the angels of God leaves us hanging. The sheep and coin can't do anything about their situation, not even repent. So, where can we go with this parable of lostness? These are stories of our condition and the inability for us to do anything for ourselves. We probably will resent this because we are a people who want to do it "our way". So, just tell me how high I have to jump, how good I have to be, and I will do it. This is the absurdity of the sheep and the coin. They can't do anything but be found. Repentance, according to Dick Jensen, in *Preaching Luke's Gospel* (yes he is a "Lutheran"), claims repentance is an acceptance of God finding us in Jesus, and our acknowledgement of that difficult admission - we are lost. This is difficult to do. Most of us would rather drive that additional 256 miles than ever admit we are lost. Paul Tillich said, "The most difficult thing to accept is that you are acceptable to God." God never leaves us where he finds us, but does accept us. We pay a price for our refusal to admit we are lost, like the Pharisees and Scribes paid a price.

The price is the joy. It is difficult to experience joy with a self righteous, self justified, and self determined orientation. As the Pharisees and Scribes grumbled because Jesus was eating and drinking with sinners, (I always wondered what my Baptist friends did with this text). Will you rejoice? Will you have joy? Do you want Joy in your life? Of course you do! These parables are not about the bad becoming good, but for the good to come to the party to rejoice and experience the joy.

If you want to joy-proof your life, you can practice a form of righteousness that scapegoats others. See no need for any repentance in your life because you are absolutely right, and refuse to rejoice when others are rejoicing. Look at the pressure you put on your life driving those extra 256 miles a year because of your refusal to admit anything. This takes a lot of energy, wastes a lot of time, and saps a lot of joy out of your life.

I think this parable is more than about the angels rejoicing in the heavens over the one sinner who repents. Jesus is addressing the joy you can have and experience because of the presence of God in your life. With God at the core, you move from willfulness to willingness, opening the door for the love of God to be in your life, for the angels to dance, and have joy restored. It is not about you, it is about the presence of God within you. Letting go and letting God is one of the most difficult struggles we all face. I pray this is a struggle in which God always wins. Amen