



Rev Amanda Mark

Lost sheep/ lost coin

Year C Ordinary Sunday 24

Luke 15:1-10

11 September 2022

When I was learning Latin at school, we had a book called Kennedy's Revised Latin Primer. It was full of hundreds of tables of verbs and nouns and adjectives - all the grind of learning a language. For us trying to discern the Gospel message, these stories are a bit like Kennedy's Primer for Latin but - without the grind. They are small, perfectly formed capsules that convey the most essential elements of God's nature and relationship with us. Little miniatures of the Gospel if you like.

They take us right down to tin tacks, to the fundamentals and ask us to interrogate ourselves about who God is and how God relates to us, what kind of God we see in these parables and how should we live our lives in recognition of that God?

We could look to see what these stories tell us about ourselves and home in on the ways in which we are lost but that's not the lens I'm going to use. I'm going at this another way because I think these parables are exciting for what they tell us about God's relationship with us. They brilliantly encapsulate the Gospel message in the easy to grasp images of the shepherd searching for his lost sheep and the woman searching for her lost coin.

If we see the shepherd searching for his lost sheep and the woman looking for her lost coin as God and ourselves as the lost sheep or the lost coin, then the parables are telling us about God's love for us.

Looking closely at the parables, what do we see? We see that this God of ours leaves ninety-nine sheep behind in the wilderness to search for his one

lost sheep. And does not give up searching until the sheep is found. Then carries it home on his shoulders and celebrates.

We see our God wearing an apron, lighting a lamp and taking a broom in her hand to sweep the floor of her house, listening for a little lost coin to clink, searching for it. And then throwing a party for the neighbours when the coin is found.

The shepherd searching for his lost sheep and the woman searching for her lost coin are determined and steadfast in their searches. They take risks and exert themselves in their searches. The shepherd leaves his ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness, vulnerable to theft, wild animals, all manner of risk. The woman lights a lamp, to searches carefully, for the coin. There's nothing half-hearted or lukewarm about the way God searches.

As we remember the Queen's service to us over her long life, we might perhaps see a little bit of a parallel between the images of God presented in these parables and the Queen's devotion and sense of duty to her people, her commitment to service as long as she lived. The God we see in these parallels is completely devoted to us, to making love known to us.

God searches for each of us, going all out to find us and bring us fully into love. And the whole of heaven celebrates when God finds us. What are we being told here? We're being told that we're a big deal for God, we matter, God goes out to find us and brings us home.

Our God knows how lost we are, all the many ways in which we are lost and in spite of this is actively searching for us, retrieving us and bringing us home. God's not looking for us because we're righteous, because we're perfect. God's looking for us in spite of our imperfection. In fact, perfection and imperfection are irrelevant. God's going after us just as we are. And once God gets us home, heaven rejoices.

And just to be clear when I talk about being lost, I'm not talking about our sin in terms of the ways in which we have not measured up. Not at all, I'm talking about the ways in which we do not allow ourselves to live fully into God's love, the ways we hide, hesitate, and hold back from living into our freedom as children of God. The places we

keep from the Light, that's what I'm talking about. Our God knows that we are more precious than our deeds or misdeeds, more valuable than our failures or our accomplishments.

A contemporary mystic, James Finley, in *Following the Mystics Through the Narrow Gate* uses a lovely image of the interplay between God and us. He describes God going out through narrow gates, over and over, in search of us and us going through the narrow gates in search of God in an unending spiral of movement. In and out, in and out. With each passage through the gate, with each instance of being found by God, our relationship with God deepens. It's an image full of movement, responsiveness, reciprocity, and tenderness. An image that tells of God's immense love for us.

In all our threading in and out the narrow gates, even in those moments when we are literally on our knees, the God of these parables is searching for us. Searching for us determinedly, tenaciously, putting everything at risk to bring us home to love, to oneness with God.

We are being invited to hear God's invitation - an invitation to imagine God looking for us, calling us in closer, holding us tenderly, celebrating our return.

As our realisation that we are one with God grows, we will see how foolish we are to imagine that we are unloved or alone, that God is in any way distant from us. We will realise how foolish it is to imagine that we could ever hide even the most minute part of ourselves from God's love. And in that realisation we will be right there in the absolute heart of our relationship with God.

These parables tell us that in our becoming to this point and all our becoming to come we are enough, more than enough and call on ourselves to recognise this, to walk out into the depths of God's love and be held in it.

There's another very important image within these stories. We see the sheep being brought back to its fold, and we can imagine the coin being returned to a jar or bag with the other nine coins (although we might also wonder whether the coin was used to pay for the party the woman throws to celebrate). They are brought back to the place they belong, back home. So, we can conclude that we too have a home, a place we belong, a place to return to, somewhere safe. That home is God's love. That's where we belong, we belong in God's love.

There's a beautiful simplicity to these images, an earthiness that tells us so much about the way God relates to us. It's not complicated: it flows in and through us just as we are. The complications are all of our making. God just brushes them off, goes out and finds us and brings us home.

These parables turn our assumptions upside down. Earthly logic does not prevail. Instead the logic of love applies. They tell us about God's economy and it's the complete opposite of the "have more, be more" consumer culture we live in. There's no neo-liberal trickle-down theory operating here, none of Bentham's greatest good for the greatest number.

The good, the whole good, is available for all and God is going out looking for us to make sure we know this. Through these stories, Jesus proclaims God's extravagant love in the metaphors of the shepherd and the determined woman.

These two parables are foundational, elemental in the way they express the core of the Gospel. The entire Gospel message is contained in them. They illustrate home truths about God's nature and love for us and our place of belonging, our home.

We will spend our entire lives being brought home to that abundant love.