

Trinity 3 (2024)

Most of you can identify with the story I am about to tell.

I was about 15 miles from home, and for some reason I reached for my wallet. It wasn't there. I panicked.

Then I remembered that like a fool I had taken it out of my pocket and laid it on the table while eating lunch at a Chinese restaurant.

Immediately, I pulled off the road, found the restaurant's telephone number and called. To my relief, the man who answered said it had been found and turned in.

I was further relieved when I picked it up and nothing was missing. Cash, credit cards, driver's license were all there. What a relief. What a joy.

No doubt you have your own story. Perhaps it was your car keys you mislaid, your car in a parking garage that you could not find, your passport on an international trip that went missing or even a child you lost in a shopping mall. Hopefully, your story ended as well as mine did.

In today's Gospel we have two lost-and-found stories.

In the first, it is a sheep that is lost; in the second, a silver coin.

If we had continued reading in Luke 15, we would have found a third, this one involving a lost son. We know the story as the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." It is read on the 9th Sunday after Trinity.

God is the chief player in all three of these parables.

In the first, He is represented by the loving shepherd who sacrifices sleep and braves danger to search and bring back his lost sheep.

In the second, He is represented by the woman who puts aside all other activities to find a lost coin. This coin may well have been one of 10 coins linked together by a silver chain found in the headdress worn by married women.

In the third, God is represented by the father who faithfully goes to the gate each morning to look for his wayward son.

From these parables, we can learn at least two things about God. First, He is a loving God; secondly, He is a rejoicing God.

Let's look at both beginning with the first: He is a loving God.

This love is displayed in the action of the shepherd who leaves the 99 to go look for one that is lost.

This devotion is likewise displayed by the woman in the second parable who is wholly focused on finding her lost coin.

And finally, this love can be seen in the third parable in the father who waits.

I might add here that at times love calls for activity (as in the search for the lost sheep and lost coin), but at other times waiting is what is required. I'm not sure but that the latter – waiting – is the harder. Regardless, love brings about both.

Surely, if a preacher had but one sermon, it would have to be about the love of God.

God takes the initiative in calling men and women to Himself, in bringing about their rescue. Paul makes this clear in Romans 5:8:

“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

A hymn by Fredrick Martin Lehman celebrates the love of God:

*The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell.
It goes beyond the highest star
And reaches to the lowest hell.*

A few stanzas down, we find these words:

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made;
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade;
To write the love of God above*

*Would drain the ocean dry;
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

All three of these parables reveal the love of God, the love celebrated in this hymn.

Before I move on, let me say that the parables recorded in Luke 15 have a context.

We discover this context as today's Gospel opens. Here we find the Pharisees and scribes complaining about Jesus, saying **“This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.”**

Who were these “sinners” with whom Jesus was consorting? ///

They were the “people of the land,” fellow Israelites who did not have the time or resources to keep all the regulations observed by the pious.

Shepherds would have been among this number. They were therefore looked down upon and despised by the religious elite.

And then there were the tax collectors. They were compromised because they had sold out to the Jew's enemies. They were in the employ of the hated Roman government. For this reason, no upright Jew would have any social interaction with them.

Also included in this number would have been the morally compromised, those like the woman, who in another place, was caught in the very act of adultery and brought to Jesus to be condemned. Of course, Jesus did not condemn her. Rather, He told her: "Go and sin no more."

Ironically, these 'soiled souls', regardless of the category into which they fell, were the very ones who were attracted to Jesus, who were coming out in droves to hear Him and who were

receiving His message with thanksgiving and joy.

They knew they were lost and undone and stood in need of the help and grace of God, whereas the scribes and Pharisees did not feel any such need.

You can almost see this latter group curling their lips and saying: **“This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.”**

They hurled these words in His face as an insult. Jesus received them as a compliment. It was for just such folk that He came.

Jesus still receives sinners. Thank goods, because we all fall into that category.

If you find yourself this morning bowed low by something you have done or left done, receive His help and forgiveness without delay. Don't let that thing defeat or overwhelm you.

The love of God is greater than all our sins. This love is not only to be proclaimed from the pulpit but practiced by all of Jesus' people.

In today's culture, people who don't measure up to someone else's standards are 'canceled'. We Christians go in the opposite direction. As God has loved and forgiven us and given us a new slate, so we seek to do for others.

But there is something else we learn about God in these three parables. This one is actually more shocking and unexpected than the first. The loving God is also *the rejoicing God*.

Have you have thought about God celebrating? Well, He does.

Like the shepherd who rejoices when he finds his sheep, like the woman who celebrates when she is reunited with her coin, like the father who stages a party at the return of his son,

so God does at the return of one sinner. Don't miss that word 'one'.

One commentator has written: **“One of the first things to arrest us powerfully is *the worth of single souls*. It was one sheep the shepherd went to find. It was for one coin the woman searched the house.”**

All of which to say, you are not a number with God. He has set His love on *you*. For God so love Mary . . . so loved John . . . put your name in the blank . . . that he gave his Son.

God not only rejoices when you take that initial step of faith but as you make progress in living out your faith . . . when, for example, you say no to temptation, when you step outside your comfort range to share the hope that is within you with someone else, when you sacrifice yourself in the service of others.

Christians should follow the lead of their heavenly Father by paying attention to people as individuals. Are we doing this? Or, are we too focused on numbers?

The scribes and pharisees erected walls to keep those they considered unfit out. **“Let not a man associate with the wicked, not even to bring him to the Law”** is a saying found in rabbinic literature.

Jesus’ people are to do it differently. They are to put up welcome signs. They are to rejoice when the poor, the halt, blind, the spiritually maimed come in . . . yes, even when one such person shows up.

Each morning a placard is placed out front of this church reading: **“Our doors are open. Visitors are very welcomed!”**

May our welcome be genuine.

May this church be a lost-and-found station for those who have been sucked into the vortex of the culture of this world and have found it empty and wanting . . . for those others cast out and reject. Let us rejoice with God when people come and not put any barriers in their way.

The loving God and the rejoicing God is the theme of today's Gospel. May it be our theme, now and always.