



Sermon Series: “A Visit to the Good Physician”

“Losing It”

Preaching Text: Luke 15:1-10

15 September 2013: 17th Sunday after Pentecost

FUMC of Arlington, Texas 76011

Our lesson reminds us today that Jesus dines with “tax collectors and sinners.” Whether we admit it or not, we all have “types” of people we would rather not associate with—or worse—have our children socialize with. “Scribes and Pharisees” were after all only protecting religious turf—because if you invite everybody, you never know who will come elbowing in! The \$64 dollar question: Are any human beings beyond God’s mercy? Tax collectors were as popular then as now. In addition to the obvious, they worked for Roman foreign tax bureaucrats and were considered ritually unclean.

Jesus defends associating with these outsiders by using parables, the most famous being the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In fact this Prodigal parable is so compelling that English teachers use it in secular literature classes as a nearly perfect example of the short story form. This parable is so exquisite we regularly let the Prodigal Son eclipse the other parables on lost-ness in Luke 15—the day’s reading. Yet, these two brief images point to an equally vital truth about God’s character. Hear the Gospel according to Luke.

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” 3 So he told them this parable:

4 “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? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 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.’ 7 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.

8 “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? 9 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.’ 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:1-10).



All three images—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son—are a part of Jesus’ response to the criticism that he paid attention to people that many in his culture regarded as sinners. These stories of lost things build upon each other, and the common theme of each of them is the joy in finding something that was lost. Let’s think about the element that is common to the first two stories . . . “Which of you, having lost a sheep . . . having lost a coin . . . would not search until it was found?” The images here are somewhat alien to us for the most part. We do not know much about shepherds or sheep. Today coins are vestiges of times gone by. But Jesus uses these brief parables to teach people about the nature of the divine. “God is like . . .” Jesus seems to say.

Throughout the church’s history there are a variety of ways to teach and learn about the faith. One way is by learning doctrine. In the Roman Catholic and some Lutheran churches this kind of instruction is called catechesis. Often those instructed use doctrinal manuals in the form of questions followed by memorized answers. Another way we teach the faith is via various affirmations of faith or creeds which we find in the back of the *UM Hymnal*. Paul uses, I have noticed, a series of rhetorical questions: first posed; then answered. This method comes from Paul’s evident Greek rhetoric education. There are several ways to offer the faith—doctrine through catechesis, creeds, memorization, or rhetorical question and answer.

Jesus employed several styles as good teachers do, but his most effective way of teaching was by means of the parable. Parables are short stories that use familiar events to illustrate an ethical or religious point. Or as the famous New Testament scholar, C. H. Dodd, once defined the parable: “At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought” (*The Parables of the Kingdom*). Parables involve a character facing a moral dilemma, or making a questionable decision and then



suffering consequences. Hear this secular parable, familiar to many:

Once upon a time, a man walking along a beach saw a boy picking up starfish and throwing them into the sea. He asked the boy why he was throwing starfish into the sea.

The boy replied, "The tide is going out. If I don't throw them in, they'll dry up and die."

The man smiled scornfully and said, "But, there are miles of beach and thousands of starfish on every mile. You can't possibly make a difference!"

The boy smiled, bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it into the sea. "Well," he said, "I made a difference for that one."

"Cut to the chase," we sometimes say. This saying goes back to movie-making in the 1920s and refers to moving from a dramatic scene to an action scene. There are times in life when we want to say, "Cut to the chase," aren't there? When it seems we're dealing with peripheral matters when we have no time to waste, we want to say, "Cut to the chase. Get to the point." We hear all the time that God loves us. Okay, cut to the chase. Jesus in his parables tells us how God loves us. "God is like . . ." Jesus seems to say.

This passage of the lost sheep and lost coin is "the point." It's "the chase." It's the focus of so much of what we want to know about life and how life is to be lived. Here's what it tells us about what we might call, "the heart of it all."

This passage tells us what the bedrock of life is like when it tells us what God is like. It says that God is love. Maybe you've never wondered about this, but many of us have wondered whether there is indeed a God and what that God is like. It makes all the difference whether there is truly a God or we're alone, completely alone, living an essentially meaningless existence that is going nowhere, with that little hyphen between the date of our birth and the date of our death all there is. It matters, too, what this God is like. Is God distant and uncaring, ignoring us? Is God distant and unable to help, with no strength to enter into our lives? Is God mean and out to get us?

Those three parables, two of which we include in our lesson today remind us



that “God is love,” and show us how God gets to the heart of it all. The parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin cut to the chase. They tell us that God is pure self-giving love. God cares. Indeed, God cares deeply.

In these parables Luke tells us that Jesus tells the tax collectors and sinners that God is like a shepherd or housewife. The Pharisees would find God symbolized by a woman as outrageous and first-century shepherds were considered lawless and dishonest. But in Jesus theology that he shares via a little story, God is like precisely like that. “God is like . . . a shepherd or like a woman who searches for a lost coin” Jesus says.

Jesus would never suggest that religion simply helps people feel good, and all the while God is like puffy clouds—in the background, present but unnoticed, essentially inactive in human affairs.

Rather God is like a slightly crazy shepherd who would leave 99% of the stock to search for one. Incredible—and in this improbable and absurd teaching we see God’s nature and we have the opportunity to believe. Amen.

David Neil Mosser, FUMC, Arlington, TX 76011