

Parables of Jesus

Message 7

How Much are You Worth to God?

Luke 15:1-10

Introduction

Luke 15 contains two of the best-known and best-loved stories in the Bible – the Parable of the Lost Sheep, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Why are these two stories so well-loved? Perhaps because they strike a deep chord within us. Perhaps because more than the other parables they resonate with us in our human condition and tap into our longing for God. Tonight we will look into the Parable of the Lost Sheep and its companion, the Parable of the Lost Coin – and next week we will consider the Prodigal Son.

Both of tonight's parables are fairly simple – someone loses something valuable and rejoices when he or she finds it. In the first parable the lost item is a sheep. A sheep was worth something in itself, but it was much more valuable for what it could produce. To use economic terms, it is the “means of production” for a sheep farmer. His income will come from the wool and the offspring of his sheep, and to lose one is to lose that much income. In today's terms, if your annual income is \$40,000 and you lose 1/100 of it, you will be short \$400 – certainly enough to make it worth your while to try to get it back. But since a sheep is a means of production, to lose one sheep means you lose its income for every year thereafter – like taking a permanent 10% pay cut. So it is very worth your while to find the sheep.

Lost Coins

The case of the coin is even more compelling. Here 1/10 of the woman's savings was lost. In those days there was no Social Security, no Medicare, no welfare. There was no health insurance, life insurance, or fire insurance. The only safety net anyone had was his or her family and his savings. Furthermore there were no banks, so everyone had to hang on to his own savings as best he could – and silver coins were a convenient way of keeping one's savings. Now what comes to mind when you read about 10 silver coins? What picture arises in your head? Are you thinking quarters? Or maybe silver dollars? That is what most of us will think, because these are the only silver coins we know. But the coins in this parable are *drachma* a Greek coin worth about a denarius – and a denarius was worth a day's wage. This is not a fortune, but neither is it a quarter! To put your self into this story, think how you would feel if you had worked all day at your job this summer and then on the way home dropped your salary for that day down the storm drain.

This parable reminds me of the story of Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of the *Little House on the Prairie* series, in her move from the Dakota Territory to Arkansas. For four years she and her husband, Almanzo, had tried to farm in South Dakota, but with no success. Like true pioneers, they sold their possessions, packed up their necessities, and traveled to a better place. They planned to use their life savings to start over in Arkansas, and put it into a \$100 bill for the trip. When they finally arrived their relief was shattered by the discovery that the \$100 bill was missing from its hiding place! Can you imagine the panic that struck them? Here they were, thousands of miles away from their families and their former home, and virtually penniless. What would become of them? They tore their camp apart Every object was moved, examined, shaken, and disassembled. Finally, what relief when they found the \$100 bill!

Lost Sheep

But the story of the lost sheep attracts our attention more, and I think it is because more than monetary value is involved. I grew up on a farm where we had lots of animals – 20 beef cows, 40 dairy cows, 10 hogs, hundreds of chickens, 10 turkeys, 2 ponies, and assorted dogs and cats. We were in it for the money – that is how my family made its living – but we had a real affection for the animals. You might find

it difficult to understand how you can be fond of your animals and still send them to the butcher when its that time, but it's possible. Furthermore, as Christians we had an additional reason to take care of our animals, for the proverb says, "The righteous man cares for the life of his beast, but the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel." When an animal was in trouble we would do all we could to bring it back to full health and strength – partly to preserve our investment, but also because we cared about the animal. sometimes when there was a large litter of pigs and one was constantly being shoved away from the milk bar, we would bring it inside and feed it from a baby bottle until it was strong enough to eat solid food. And often we would go out in the day or night to chase cows (usually) back into our fields. I can remember many cold, dark, rainy nights chasing wayward cows all over the countryside.

My high school calculus teacher owned forty acres and raised a few animals. He had grown up in New York city, and we amused ourselves at his tales of learning to farm. Once he told us about a baby pig that had become very sick so he did the obvious thing – he took it to the vet. The vet just laughed at him! "I am going to charge you more than that pig is worth just for coming into my office," he said. My teacher was confused. He did not expect the vet to react that way. He was thinking that the job of a vet is to do whatever is necessary to care for sick animals, but the vet was thinking that my teacher was a poor farmer to waste his money like that. He could have gone to the auction and bought two more baby pigs for the price of the visit to the vet. So why am I telling you this story? To illustrate that we grow attached to our animals. We value them more than their strict monetary worth.

About 10 years ago I was leading a camp for college students. One of my colleagues, Steve, had brought along his guinea pig. One day the guinea pig got loose in the woods, but this was not discovered until it was dark. Now, I don't know how much you know about guinea pigs, but they are pretty helpless creatures. They have poor eyesight, they can't run very well, and they have no natural defenses. They can't dig and they have no armor or sprays or quills to protect them. In their natural habitat they live among rocks and dash under them for safety whenever they sense danger. So here was this guinea pig out in the woods where a fox or owl or cat or a dog or anything else would be likely to find it and have a tasty meal. Steve was sick with anxiety. Hopeless as it was, he got a flashlight and went searching in the woods for his beloved pet. After an hour or so he gave up and slogged up to bed. At the first light of day he was up and out in the woods. What a joy to find his guinea pig safe, hiding under some brush all night! He was so excited. We who are supported in our ministry by a lot of people write to them every couple of months to tell them about the ministry we are doing. In Steve's next letter guess what took front page? His excitement about finding his guinea pig! Never mind that his readers were supporting him to minister to college students – he just couldn't keep from telling everyone the wonderful news about his guinea pig who was lost, and now is found.

This true story about Steve and his guinea pig is simply the Parable of the Lost Sheep in modern times. In both cases the owner of a helpless animal went to amazing lengths to rescue the animal from certain destruction. There is some actual monetary value at stake, but more than that is the love and devotion of the owner to his animal. It is that love which drives him out into the night, into the wilderness, exposed to the dangers of the darkness – for the sake of his animal. And it is that love which moves him to call his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him when he finds the lost creature.

Modern Sheep

How do these stories of sheep and coins relate to mostly suburban college students who are not studying animal husbandry? Well, it shouldn't be too hard to see that God is represented by the shepherd and the woman. Although there is a big difference between a shepherd and a woman, the similarity in these parables is that they are the owners of the property that became lost. Similarly, God is the owner of His

people. He created us and therefore owns us. Just as you own something you create and can do with it as you wish, so may God. You can write a computer program, or design a car, or write a piece of music or a play. You can then copyright it to publicly claim your ownership. Then you can sell publishing rights to whom-ever you wish, or you can produce it yourself, or you can put it away in a drawer for 20 years, or you can burn it. You have that right.

Now the shepherd did not create his sheep, but as their owner he has the right to do as he wishes with them. I knew some farmers who did not treat their animals well. Peter recently read *Animal Farm*, the anti-communist book by George Orwell, in which the animals rebel against the drunken, lazy farmer and establish a farm owned communally by all the animals. Such a man would be foolish, but a farmer has the right to skimp on the animals' food if he wishes. So the shepherd could have let the sheep go. He could have said, "It is cold and dark. I could kill myself out there looking for that lousy sheep. Besides she is *always* getting lost. This is the last straw. If she can't find her way home, good riddance!" But this shepherd is not like that. Not only does he undertake the risk and danger of going after the sheep, he really rejoices when he finds her. It is clear that this shepherd is not in this job merely for the money. He really loves those smelly old sheep!

So the shepherd gives us a vivid image of God – owner of all, and lover of all. God did not create this world simply for what He can get out of it – He loves what He has created. And if God is the shepherd, we must be the sheep. Sheep are a common symbol for people, the most familiar example being the 23rd psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...."

Which Sheep are You?

Now comes the big question. Which sheep are you – the sheep in the sheepfold, or the lost sheep? Are you the sheep who faithfully follows his master every day? Are you obedient to all of Christ's commands? If so, then good. You are safe in the sheepfold. But I doubt if that description fits anyone here. Sheep are notoriously incapable of taking care of themselves. They instinctively wander off the path and get lost. Cows will wander from place to place as a herd. They stick together and all fight off danger together. They have horns to gore their enemies, and their sheer size gives them a big advantage. You can turn your beef cows out to pasture and they will take care of themselves. They will find food and water, give birth, and care for their young. But there is no such thing as an obedient sheep. It's not that they are intentionally contrary – they are just so dumb! They do not stay together, they cannot find food and water by themselves, they cannot bear their young without assistance, and they cannot protect themselves. All those sheep in the sheepfold had been lost once, too. None of them was superior to the others.

We are just like these sheep. Turn to Isaiah, chapter 53. The scripture says in Isaiah 53, verse 6, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." Everyone of us here is the lost sheep. This passage uses the customary biblical metaphor "way", or path to describe the conduct of our lives. Like sheep who turn off the path and do not follow the shepherd, we live as we wish, disobedient to God's commands. Notice that the verse in Isaiah says that this is true of *all* of us. Every person in the world is guilty of disobeying God's commands. No one is innocent. We all were lost sheep.

But if we merge Isaiah's verse with the Parable of the Lost Sheep, we would need to make an adjustment. For Isaiah says that the shepherd bears the iniquity of the sheep. In other words, the shepherd takes the penalty for the sheep's waywardness. It's as if the shepherd finds the sheep surrounded by a pack of wolves. No man would be able to fight off a pack of hungry wolves. So to save the sheep, the shepherd throws himself into the pack. The wolves dive at the shepherd, tearing flesh from limb to satisfy their

hunger, while in the confusion the sheep runs free. This is what Jesus did. He not only came looking for us sinful people, He offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sins. Look back at verses four and five in Isaiah 53.

*“Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted
But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities;
the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed.”*

Look at the repetition of the word “our”. It is *our* griefs and *our* sorrows, *our* transgressions and *our* iniquities. “Our” takes in everyone of us. We *all* bring grief, sorrow, transgression, and iniquity to God. Jesus bore the full weight of these sins of ours. God Himself punished Jesus for our sins, and in the end we have peace and healing as a result. This maybe a familiar passage to some of you, but I hope it is gripping every time you hear it. What an amazing thing that Jesus should suffer so horribly for us, so that we might have peace and healing! How can you ever hear this without goose bumps? Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, and grateful to Christ, and thrilled to know that you have been saved from this suffering forever by Jesus’ death for you? Can you hear this with a cold heart? Then you will be warmed in hell, unless God wakes you up to the great mercy He shows you here.

You see, this was exactly the reason Jesus told this parable. The Pharisees and the scribes were smugly confident that they were in the sheepfold – and they resented the sheep outside the fold. They were angry that Jesus associated with sinners and tax collectors. They hated sinners and tax collectors. Sinners were an embarrassment to their nation, a blot on their purity. They fouled the Jewish race. Tax collectors worked for he hated Romans, and so were traitors. In fact, come to think of it , they were not sheep outside the fold – they were skunks! They were repulsive, and it really irritated the good religious Jews that they had to put up with this riff raff. Jesus should have chased them off so the Pharisees and the scribes could have listened to Jesus in comfort.

The core message of this parable is that God loves His lost sheep. Even though they are dumb, even though they are frustratingly helpless, even though they keep getting lost over and over again, God still loves these smelly sheep. In fact, He loves them so much that He keeps going after them again and again. This is what Jesus was doing in this passage. The parable really narrates what is going on in the situation. In His preaching Jesus is seeking the lost sheep and bringing them back to the fold. And as we saw in Isaiah, Jesus is even willing to die for His sheep – yes, He did die for His sheep!

Your Worth to God

How much are you worth to God? Your constituent parts aren’t worth much, you know. Scientists have analyzed the chemical makeup of the human body and it only comes to a few cents. But what are you worth to God? Are you worth a day’s wage? Yes! God is like the woman who turned her house upside down to find the lost drachma. Are you worth as much as a sheep? Yes! God is like the shepherd that went looking for the lost sheep. But you are worth far more than that to God. You are worth so much that He sent Jesus to die for you. That is how much He loves you. He killed His own son so that you would go free, so that you would have life, so that you would be part of the flock of His sheep!

If you believe this, it will totally transform your life. If you have received such love from God, how in your right mind could you ever love anything else more than Him? How could you love another man or woman, career or car, wealth or prestige more than God? How could you worry about your exams, if you know that God loves you so much that He died for you? Doesn’t this just overwhelm all your other loves and fears?

Or maybe you are not a lost sheep. Perhaps you are a good sheep, a safe sheep, a smug sheep. Perhaps you resent those sinners out there – people who curse and cheat and get drunk and fornicate. No, you don't resent them, you hate them. They ruin the curve and jack up the tuition by their sinful behavior. And certainly they are not nice. You never invite one of them to go to the movies with you, or join your friends at dinner (– your friends would hate you for it!). Yes, perhaps you are a good sheep who does not need forgiveness because you are not lost. In fact, perhaps you are not a sheep at all!

Folks, this parable hits us right at the core of our being. God did not send Christ to find us because He needed the exercise. He sent Christ because we were lost. All of us. Totally lost. Absolutely helplessly lost. And we keep getting lost, like sheep. We keep needing Christ to put us back on the path. We keep needing Christ to tell us that we are lost, but He loves us. We keep needing Christ to find us, and bring us home, and put us back on the path.

A Sheep's Response

If you are a lost sheep who has been found, a sinner who has been saved by the death of Christ, the least you will do is love and worship your Savior. You will not go through life like everyone else. You will wake each day with gratitude for your narrow escape and Christ's love for you. You may find a beautiful wife or handsome husband, you may get a great job and make a lot of money, but you won't care. You may *lose* those blessings, but you will still be full of gratitude for your salvation. Each Lord's Day you will go to the sheepfold to praise your wonderful savior with the other lost sheep who were found. You will be thrilled to hear His voice when the scripture is read and the sermon is preached. You will respond in hearty song and fervent prayer. And you will proclaim His death and resurrection as you eat the bread and drink the wine of communion. This will be the most exciting moment of your week.

Is this you? To change the metaphor a bit more, all of us are still partly lost. Our love is not as warm as it should be, and our lives are not as dedicated to God as they should be. So let's praise God for saving us from the terrible death we deserve, and ask Him to keep transforming us into the sheep He wants us to be. Amen.

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