

*Luke 15: 1-13*

*Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

*So he told them this parable: "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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 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." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.*

*'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? 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." Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'*

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**Lost and Found**

One day a teenager lost a hard contact lens while playing around out in her driveway. After a brief, fruitless search, she gave up. Her mother took up the cause and within minutes found the lens. Oh those mothers! "How did you do that?" the daughter asked. "We weren't looking for the same thing," the mother said. "You were looking for a small piece of clear plastic. I was looking for \$150."

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Jesus was talking about just this in his two parables today. He and the Pharisees saw the very same people quite differently. When the Pharisees saw the people with whom Jesus ate meals, the Pharisees saw "sinners," only small pieces of cheap plastic, easy to look past or through on the blacktop. But Jesus saw people of great value, worth searching for, worth spending time on, looking for very carefully, down on his hands and knees in a driveway.

Miracle of miracles – here's astonishing news: God sees all people as having enormous value. Not just the good people. Not just the smart ones or the hard workers. Not just the ones who support righteous causes and act graciously.

But also those who irritate us. Who are rude. Who act poorly.

And it's so hard to grasp this, especially for those of us who try really hard to act well, that Jesus keeps telling stories, over and over. He speaks again and again of many things that may look minor, but have enormous value.

And because he was one of the greatest storytellers who ever lived, he had the knack for using images that would capture the imagination of those to whom he was talking.

In today's bible story, I imagine Jesus speaking out on rocky slopes, better used for pasture than planting. Casting his eye over the hillsides, and the flocks grazing, he'd tell of a shepherd, paid by all the families of his village to follow their roving flocks from place to place, each family owning a few of the herd.

The hireling would steer the sheep towards green grass, a tedious job, perhaps, but one with a clear bottom line: bring back all the flock. Don't lose any; keep watch at night when predators may come; stay alert to the lambs that may stray. Each sheep, known by name to its owners, representing a portion of the wealth of a village family. Their source of wool for the cool winters. Their source of the milk for cheese. Their source of stud fees for siring more sheep. Their source of lambs to increase the herd. Their source, on grand occasions, of a roast for the feast.

The bottom line: bring back all the flock. If one is missing, search everywhere, even where the frightened sheep may hide as darkness falls. Sheep won't bleat, to make it easier for the shepherd to find them, because sheep fear drawing the attention of wolves. So with a torch, or simply by starlight, the shepherd runs and stumbles, crawls and climbs, searching until finally the missing one is found and relief floods him.

Exuberant, rejoicing, he returns to the village. Look, I have found it! Now all are found, the herd whole and complete again, and the village parties late into the night.

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When Jesus tells the tale later in another village, among the small cluster of houses, perhaps as dusk falls and shadows lengthen, the seeker in his story is now a woman. She has carefully saved ten coins, but after dinner, finds one missing. Her heart racing, she runs next door to borrow an extra lamp, and to the neighbor on the other side, for a young girl with keener eyesight than hers. The whole home must be searched, now – she'll never sleep until it's found.

The ten coins may be her savings for the whole year. From the vegetables she tills in the back yard. From her hen's eggs she stoops to collect. From the tunics she weaves on the loom inherited from her mother, rising early each morning to send the shuttle cock back and forth, back and forth again, adding as many new rows as she can before the children awake and take all her attention.

Perhaps the ten coins are all she has saved over a lifetime, given to her by a parent long gone, who wanted her to have food, even if her husband died or sons went to war and didn't return. Perhaps the ten coins are kept for her daughter, the dowry that would allow her girl to marry well, or to marry someone other than the man likely to abuse her.

Ten coins, so precious. So when one is lost, the whole little home is searched. She sweeps the dirt floor under the mats, sifts her hands through the grain bag, combs fingers in the ash of the stove, looking everywhere, worried, wondering what could have become of the tenth coin.

And when it is found, all the homes around her hear the delighted shout: I found it!! Come, have wine with me, to celebrate! What was lost, now is found!

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Where we might see someone across the world, or across town, or even across this sanctuary, as one of little worth, God sees differently. Very differently.

The one with whom we are no longer willing to break bread, Love Divine ushers in to dinner, bends closer to hear, values immensely.

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My lesson on this came in 1994, when I began work for the US Attorney, the federal prosecutor's office in Boston. 99 of the 100 attorneys employed there were superb trial lawyers, bringing criminal cases – the important job of keeping citizens safe by putting bad guys in jail. I was the one who had a different role, odd and experimental – trying to prevent violence, not just prosecute it.

At that time, Boston had been ravaged by the highest murder rate ever experienced, at least double the rate it is today, mainly gun violence among rival gangs. Dedicated and courageous teams of local, state and federal agents, police and prosecutors identified many causing the violence, and incarcerated them. Violence declined.

But though the numbers of deaths had diminished, we continued to be very worried, because there were children – kids 16 and under – caught up in the violence, too. Were there other approaches possible, to supplement the prosecutions?

There were many pivotal points in my journey, but today I focus on two: key things said by the police gang unit and by African American ministers. When police officers in the gang unit were asked what they most needed to fight the violence, the officers did not ask for better guns or more squad cars; they wanted better educational and job opportunities for the young men in the gangs.

It's hard to escape gang life once you were in it, they said. It's hard to get schooling, when you'd been kicked out of schools, and no one wants you back. It's hard to give up street life if your criminal record prevents you from getting an honest job. It's hard to put down your gun, if everyone else still has his.

From this was born a coalition of law enforcement, business, education and clergy leaders looking for a way to prevent violence, not just prosecute it.

But the best path wasn't immediately clear. Should we focus on education for the youngest, preschool children, so that a solid foundation would be given to every child? Should we focus on bolstering middle school experience, where statistics show students often begin to slip?

For several meetings, we sat around a long conference table at the US Attorney's Office –the Police Commissioner, the District Attorney, the Attorney General, representatives from the Mayor's Office and Private Industry Council. There were good arguments for each alternative.

Then the Rev. Ray Hammond spoke, minister at Bethel African Methodist Church. This group, he said, had "political capital," as law enforcement and as elected officials, and we needed to use our influence for those least likely to get help from other quarters. Little children and middle schoolers were "cute" – they would always have an appeal. But nobody described as "cute" young men aged 16-24 who already had a criminal record. They were seen as beyond hope, too old to turn around, a lost cause. They should be locked up, the key thrown away, most felt.

"But I will never give up on them," Rev. Hammond said, "because God never does. We believe in redemption."

Where others saw these young men as disposable, unredeemable, Ray Hammond saw someone's child, worth our effort. Though cops knew the young men had a huge, uphill struggle ahead to get on the right path, they also urged us to risk our political capital on a jobs and education program.

Those who knew their sins the most keenly, who knew we likely would often fail, were also the ones who saw the gang kids' potential most clearly.

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Why is he eating with those sinners? asked the Pharisees. He doesn't see in them what we do.....

No, I don't said Jesus. Said the cops. Said the ministers. We see all of the flaws – up clear and personal – and we see potential, too.

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I wonder, can I do the same? Can you? See each another's flaws – the stuff of our being human and hurt – *and* also see one another's value, despite those flaws. See another person worth trying to connect with again?

Because, my friends, where we may see only a small piece of plastic hopelessly lost on the driveway, Jesus knows there is \$150 worth of a contact lens lying there that we need to find, in order for us to see, in order to live with far more clarity, far more insight.

Our nemesis may become our greatest teacher. The one lost to us, whom we deem no longer worthy of our time, could be the one to change our life.

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One final thing. I've spoken of the times we may tend to see little potential in others, when we dismiss them, ignore them, see through them as if they were not there – times when we're the Pharisees in the story.

But there are other times, when it is *we* who feel like we are of very little value. It is we who feel we have very little faith. It is we who feel completely lost, not even sure why we showed up at church this morning, because nothing really ever changes. We never do feel found, by anyone here. Or even noticed much.

If that is you today – because it is all of us some days – notice this: the lost coin doesn't do anything at all. It's just found, by God who does the seeking. The lost sheep may actually have hidden from the Shepherd, out of fear. But it's found, too, and carried home on the shepherd's shoulders. We who are lost, as all of us are sometimes, we who feel we have little faith, or little potential, aren't the ones in this story tasked with seeking God.

It is God who seeks and finds us. Who would go to the ends of the world to rescue you and bring you home.

Have you *ever* experienced that, just a bit – a glimpse somewhere that you are not alone, but are connected to a gracious power? The lifting of some burden. A word offered when needed. A sense, after a long and sleepless night, that there is light finding you, coming though you have not stirred at all: first a hint of it reaching around the shade of your dark window, then a presence growing stronger, turning the darkness to light, filling the room steadily with more and more brightness. Sun rising across the distant horizon, again...

When we least expect it, hearing a shepherd's call, feeling arms beneath us picking us up, and gently carrying us home.

I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see. Amazing!