

I

I'm notorious for losing sunglasses. That's one of the reasons I only buy the cheap ones. I'll take them off and leave them on the dash of my car, or I'll tuck them into the breast pocket of my jacket, or I'll leave them on the desk in my office or on the side table in our kitchen, and when I go to put them on again, they've somehow vanished.

Occasionally, I'll come across a pair that I'd long ago written off as lost. Suddenly, as if by magic, they reappear in the coat pocket or under the papers on my desk. But because I don't put a lot of value into sunglasses, it's not that big a deal to me when I find the ones that I'd long ago written off as lost.

II

We all have things like that, don't we? Whether it's ink pens or pocket combs or socks, all of us have things that we lose from time to time. When we lose things that we don't value very much, we don't invest a lot of time or effort in looking for them – we just replace them the next time we're at the store. And even if we happen to find those lost sunglasses or pens or combs or socks again, generally, we barely react, because we didn't value those things very highly in the first place.

Things get lost. And sometimes they're found again. But if we never placed much value on those things in the first place, when that which was lost is

found again, we don't think too much of it.

But as it turns out, God is a little different when it comes to the lost and found.

III

This winter and spring, we've been reading and preaching our way through the Gospel of Luke, and in our story today, Jesus tells three successive short stories, or parables, as they're called, about things that were lost. But in each case, when those lost things were found again, there was complete and overwhelming joy on the part of the one who found them. So listen now for a Word from God from Luke 15:1-32

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 persons 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.”

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set

off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of

yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Oftentimes, the parables in Luke’s gospel are so vivid and compelling that we forget that Jesus often told them in response to a question or a comment. A few weeks ago, we read the Parable of the Good Samaritan, but often we forget that the parable Jesus’ response to the question, “Who is my neighbor?”

And in today’s passage, there are three successive parables told back to back. The Parable of the Lost Sheep. The Parable of the Lost Coin. And the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

And each of these is so vivid and compelling that it’s easy to forget that Jesus told these parables as a response, not to a question, but to a snide comment.

The tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. Within the social value structure of first-century Jewish society, tax collectors and sinners were the rough equivalent of the plastic combs and ink pens and solo socks of society. Within the social structure of the day, the tax collectors and sinners had little value, whereas the Pharisees and the scribes were viewed as the “respectable” people, the ones who held power and privilege and positions of honor.

Their knock on Jesus was that he was always consorting with “the wrong

kind of people.” And so they grumbled against him, saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

And that grumble is what led Jesus to respond with these three parables.

Which 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 who is lost until he finds it? And when he finds it, comes home, and calls together his friends and neighbors saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost?” Who does that?

In the shepherding business, there’s just a certain amount of loss to be expected. Given all the wolves and lions out there, and given the fact that sheep aren’t known to be the brightest of God’s creatures, sometimes, sheep get lost. In fact, some might argue that a one percent loss rate is actually pretty good performance for a shepherd. But not this shepherd, apparently.

And who turns their house upside down for a lost nickel? OK, so maybe you do know some people who would tear apart their house in search of a nickel, but who really, when they found it, would call their friends and neighbors together and spend \$50 to throw a party so they could share with them the wonderful news that they found the five cents that they’d been missing? Who does that?

And what father, after his son insults him and breaks his heart and

runs off to the far country and blows all his money on dissolute living only to come crawling home looking and smelling like a pig, runs to grab him up in his arms and orders the fatted calf to be killed and puts a ring on his finger and throws an extravagant party? Who does that?

According to Jesus this is what happens when even one person repents – when even one turns away from sin and evil and turns to the path of God. It seems that the God who was and is and is to come, the God who is made known to us in Jesus of Nazareth, is not willing to write off a sheep or a nickel or a you or a me just because we happen to get lost. When even one sinner repents, when even one sinner turns to Jesus, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God.

IV

And so I wonder, where do you find yourself in these stories, my friend? Are you the lost sheep who strayed, or are you among the 99 who stayed put? Are you the coin that got lost, or the nine who remained? Are you the prodigal son who ran to the far country? Or the one who stayed home?

To be honest with you, I think I'm often a lot more like the older brother in the story. Like so many of you, I was raised with values where you keep your head down and you work hard and you do the right thing because it's the right thing, not because you expect to get some sort of award or recognition. I believe that everyone should save

something for a rainy day, because one of the only guarantees in this life is that one of these days, it's going to rain. Yes, I think I'm a lot like that older brother.

When the older brother heard the sound of music coming from the house, he had to ask someone what was going on. And when he heard that his foolish younger brother had returned, and his father had reacted by killing the fatted calf and throwing a party, resentment coursed through that boy's veins like fire. He was so filled with resentment, so filled with anger that his father had not dealt with his brother according to his many sins, but rather according to the boundless measure of his steadfast love, that he wouldn't even go inside the house.

To repent means to turn, to turn from the path one has been traveling and to turn toward the path of God. In this parable that Jesus teaches that we have come to know as the prodigal son, who is it that is in need of repentance? Who is it that is in need of turning?

Is it the brother who selfishly demanded his inheritance, then spent it foolishly, only to come crawling back later when there was nothing left? Or is it the brother who stayed and worked and worked and worked, not for the joy of working, but out of a cold and calculated desire to win his father's approval and advance himself, who was filled with bitterness when his lost brother did not get what he thought he deserved? Which one was in need of repentance?

The answer, I think, is both. Both sons were in need of turning - turning from the path they had been traveling and turning toward the path of God. Imagine what might have happened if, on the day the younger brother returned, the older brother had spotted him first, instead of the father. Imagine what would have happened if that older brother had marched out to meet him with a big I told you so speech and a how dare you show your face around here and a you better be sorry. That young brother might have turned right around and headed right back to the far country just to stick it in his big brother's eye.

But thanks be to God, the father found that younger boy first. And the father ran to him, and scooped him up, and killed the fatted calf, and threw a party, and acted like a fool. And when the elder boy was standing outside, refusing to go in, refusing his own father's hospitality, the father went outside to him, and said, "Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate, for this brother of yours was lost, and now he is found."

Who does that? Who races to welcome the one who strayed and is eaten up with shame and guilt? Who goes out of the house to comfort the one who stayed but is filled with bitterness and resentment? According to Jesus, it's the same God who refuses to write off even one sheep. The same God who refuses to give up on searching even for one lost nickel. The same God who refuses to write anyone off.

Who does that? The same God who calls you and I in this Lenten season to repentance - to turn from the path that we've been walking, and to turn toward the path of God. The same God who, in the person of Jesus Christ, teaches us these parables while he's on his way to Jerusalem, on his way to the cross, for you, for me, and yes, even for them.

Thanks be to God. Amen.