

Lauren Baske Davis

2.27.2022

First UCC Northfield

## Sermon on Luke 15: 1-10 – The Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin

### Luke 15:1-10

*Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' <sup>3</sup>So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup>'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? <sup>5</sup>When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <sup>6</sup>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." <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>'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? <sup>9</sup>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." <sup>10</sup>Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'*

### Sermon

As I mentioned in The Chronicle this week, Jesus' parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin precede the parable of the Prodigal son. These three parables of the sheep, the coin, and the son are told by Jesus right alongside one another. Having just spent 3 weeks on the Prodigal story, we're focusing on the sheep and the coin today.

You may have noticed, that one of the biggest differences among our parables today from the Prodigal son story is that in the Prodigal, the son, purposely leaves. He can find his way home when he wants to, and we know there's lots of joy when he does. Sheep and coins, though, don't lose themselves purposely. And they can't they find their way home themselves.

So these parables are different, which is why we've separated them out. But Jesus told these three parables together. These parables are Jesus' response to a question—or a complaint—if we read it that way. The question Jesus has been asked, is why. "Why, oh *why*," the people want to know, is Jesus "associating himself with sinners and tax collectors?"

We have the ability to look back on it and be like, "yeah, that's just what Jesus did!" But in the moment, it wasn't clear. Why on earth would this incredible Rabbi want to hang out with the people who are society's clearly labeled deviants—the people who keep society from flourishing—the people who are a risk to themselves and others?<sup>1</sup> The people who are marginalized, or in the case of tax collectors, have possibly marginalized themselves? You have to remember that when people were sick, disabled, or in a line of disreputable work, it might have been looked upon as something they brought on themselves. "Rabbi," they wanted to know, "why do you have concern for *those* people?"

And that's what brings us to the sheep and the coin parables. "Why do I care about these people?" Jesus says, "Let me tell you about a shepherd." Now, shepherds, were not highly regarded in society. Shepherds who would spend so much time in the fields with their animals that, their clothes were ratty, and they were stinky, and they were low on the rungs of society in the Ancient Near East. You didn't aspire to be a shepherd. You just were one.<sup>2</sup> But Jesus begins by asking people to imagine themselves as shepherds.

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<sup>1</sup> Rolf Jacobson quoting Eric Barreto, *I Love To Tell The Story* Narrative Lectionary Podcast, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/nl262-lost-sheep-coin-son> .

<sup>2</sup> Roudebaugh, *Luke: Social Science Commentary*, 288

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Jesus tells about how, of course, a shepherd leaves 99 sheep in the desert. As one does. In the wilderness. On their own. Of *course* you leave 99 sheep on their own to go find one lost sheep. In fact, Jesus says, “which one of you *wouldn't* do that?” Now at this point Jesus’ audience might have laughed. “Leave 99 sheep in the desert wilderness on their own, vulnerable and liable to be eaten by a pack of wolves, or succumb to thirst, or get lost themselves? Just to go find one lost sheep?” The people would be thinking, “no one leaves 99 sheep on their own in the wilderness. That’s ridiculous!”

Jesus continues: “when the shepherd has found the sheep, he rejoices, lays it on his shoulders,” carrying it home, then calling together “friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost!’” Jesus wants them to understand, it’s a joy so profound, you can’t keep it to yourself! You call everyone together to celebrate! I wonder if people would’ve said at this point, “Ha! Okay, Jesus. Good one.”

But Jesus, that joker, continues on, this time with a wonderful feminine image: “Or what woman, having 10 silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, pick up a “broom, and [sweep] every corner...[tucking] up her skirts and [flattening] herself on the floor, [digging] through dust bunnies and [checking] every dress pocket [until] she has found it?”<sup>3</sup> Then she calls together her friends and neighbors, and says, ‘Rejoice with me! I’ve found the coin that I’d lost.’” Jesus’ listeners might have said, “Wait, she loses a coin—possibly money for the family’s food for the week or month—and then promptly throws a *costly* party when she finds it?! Oh Jesus, that’s foolish. They don’t make sense, these parables.”

And that’s Jesus’ point. People ask why Jesus is welcoming—accepting—sinners and eating with—that is to say, approving of—them.<sup>4</sup> And Jesus’ response is essentially this: “Why do I welcome sinners and tax collectors, the people who may fracture community wellbeing? Because it’s fun. Because it’s fun when you find something or someone that’s been lost. It’s foolish love, yes, and it is joyful.” He might even say it’s restorative.

Think of those words. Rejoice with me. “Rejoice with me,” Jesus says, “because when you find something that’s been lost, the proper response on heaven and on earth is to celebrate.”<sup>5</sup>

Now from an evolutionary standpoint, Jesus is on to something. Celebrations like Jesus is describing might seem frivolous, “spending valuable resources and energy, while at the same time taking us away from productive endeavors. Yet all cultures celebrate, and so do some species of animals. Animal experts can tell you how elephants “stamp around excitedly...flapping ears, and entwining trunks,” when they’re reunited. Or how wolves “howl exuberantly [and harmoniously] when the pack comes back together after splitting up for a hunt.” Or how chimpanzees, when given bundles of fresh food will hoot loudly, drawing other animals into the vicinity, then rushing to kiss and embrace one another before they sit down to enjoy their feast.<sup>6</sup> All of these creatures, and assuredly more that we just don’t know about yet,

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<sup>3</sup> Emmy Kegler, *One Coin Found*, p 5.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Jill Levine, *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, footnotes for Luke 15.1-2, p 132.

<sup>5</sup> Matt Skinner, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/nl262-lost-sheep-coin-son>

<sup>6</sup> Ingrid Fetell Lee, *Joyful: The Surprising Power of Ordinary Things to Create Extraordinary Happiness*, p 246-7.

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partake in “inclusive delight.” “Rejoice with me!” Those who study animals believe “joy evolved for the express purpose of helping us steer toward conditions that would make life flourish.”<sup>7</sup> Joy steers us toward conditions that make life flourish.

Rejoicing is not a small thing. It’s not pointless. And Jesus knows it. He knows it’s not just going to be fun, it’s going to make a difference for the people he’s spending time with, but it’s also going to make a difference in the community. Steering them toward flourishing. Spending time with marginalized or the ostracized because its joyful, is actually powerful. What is joyful is also powerful. *Especially* when we feel the heaviness of the world right now. Discriminatory and harmful anti-trans laws in Texas and other states. Russia’s violent invasion of Ukraine. In light of those things, joy is a mighty idea. It is a resilient idea.

A year or more ago, on Zoom, I showed you my “Joy is a form of resistance” mug, here. Rejoicing is a way of looking—not denying—*looking clearly* at the hard realities of the world right now, and saying, “no. I won’t let that reality be all there is.”

When you look at Jesus getting to know and eating meals with “sinners and tax collectors,” he was also saying, “I won’t let people be divided or excluded. I will accept them and keep company with them. And somehow, through the joy of being together, we’ll restore ourselves to one other. I will be *with* them, and in doing so, transform something. Because where there was marginalization, now there will also be friendship and joy.” To practice rejoicing, as foolish as it may sound, even when Jesus says it, is to say, “There is a reality I’m living into and it’s a position of strength and bravery. It is no small thing to decide to do something for the sake of joy. Especially when times are hard.”

Think about rejoicing in any context. Take Black History Month. A black artist and musician, Andre Henry, who I follow on social media, said last week that so often we focus on the struggles and our nation’s horrible history of slavery that was imparted upon African American people. But that focus can stifle the reality of rejoicing: of celebrating black Americans achievements and black joy that also exists despite a continuing unjust world.<sup>8</sup> Rejoicing is powerful and it points us all toward flourishing.

Or take transgender joy as exhibited through the presence of our own community LGBTQIA+ youth group CYAN, or by Pastor Cindy’s chosen [bulletin cover](#) today in the face of discriminatory laws popping up telling people to be afraid and to deny who they are. Rejoicing is powerful and it points us all toward flourishing. Or take people all over the world coming to support Ukraine, especially the Russian people in St. Petersburg standing in solidarity together against their government’s choices, knowing that it’s illegal to demonstrate? Rejoicing, or choosing a different way, is powerful and it points us all toward flourishing.

You see, when Jesus says that he hangs out with sinners and tax collectors because there’s joy in it, it’s not a glib statement. And he’s not talking about happiness. He’s talking about something deeper: shared, inclusive delight; choosing one another; seeing the reality of the way things are and saying, “no” to it. In spending his time with “sinners and tax collectors,”

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 297.

<sup>8</sup> Andre Henry @theandrehenry on Instagram, video post on 23 February 2022.

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he's recreating society and defeating the lie that says we are separate from or better than one another.

Now we have focused Jesus' response, and talked a lot about his perspective within the parable. We've talked about what that might mean for our own lives. I want to close with one more perspective. Take one more current-day example of finding coins.

Our own dear Bob Griggs wrote an article that appeared in the Minneapolis Star Tribune on December 14, 2021, entitled, "The Pandemic, Mental Health and Hunting 'Wild Coins.'" In it, he talks about how taking walks where he looks for dropped coins is a great coping resource for mental health, especially through hard times, like the pandemic. He shares his practice of "wild-coin" hunting.

Bob says that if you find a coin at home, that's just picking up. But coins found in the yard, in public places, and especially in places you wouldn't expect to find them, like in "a busy parking lot" are wild. He is a wild coin hunter. Bob talks about what a healing practice this is for him. And though I know Bob did not write this to imagine himself into the parable, nor to incorporate the parable of the lost coin at all, it's apt.

Like the woman sweeping the floors in Jesus' parable, Bob says that when you're a coin hunter, "any time [he] find[s] a coin is a happy time. He tells of a specific time when he found a very hard to find coin. He writes,

*My favorite is a corroded penny I found at our local clinic's parking ramp. I almost missed it: The penny was in a little puddle of snow melt, in a parking space that was littered with two discarded COVID masks, various food wrappings, cigarette butts, a crushed ballpoint pen and one leather glove. Distracted by all the debris, I would have passed it by if my professional instincts hadn't caused me to stop and look into that quiet little pool. Half hidden at the bottom, a penny was looking up at me.*

Then he writes,

*I couldn't wait to get home and celebrate this latest trophy with my wife. Celebrating whenever you can, finding a penny will do, is an aid in mental health recovery and also in coping with the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>*

The beauty of Bob's piece is that it attends to health and recovery, and also transcends those points. (You can find a few copies of Bob's article in the office after worship). We know that celebrating, rejoicing, is transformative. Joy is no small thing. It is powerful. Whether you are the finder or the coin, the shepherd or the sheep.

Jesus' point was the looking, the finding, and maybe more than anything, the rejoicing. For us today, seeing that heaviness of the world: whether it is anti-trans laws in Texas or a horrific war waged on the Ukrainian nation, choosing to associate with one another, to find and be found by one another—and to *rejoice*—is to choose a reality we want to live in. Why welcome and eat with sinners? Because to find, to associate and *rejoice* with one another is to choose a shared future. Jesus is saying: to include, to stand in solidarity, to decenter self and

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<sup>9</sup> Rev. Robert Griggs, *Minneapolis Star Tribune* 14 December 2021, "The Pandemic, Mental Health and Hunting 'Wild Coins.'" <https://www.startribune.com/the-pandemic-mental-health-and-hunting-wild-coins/600127094/>

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join with one another isn't just fun, it points it toward flourishing. It recreates the world. It makes God holler with joy, and around with laughter, and hug everyone nearby, too.

You will be found; you have been found. Let us find one another, and then let us rejoice.  
Amen.