

Finder of All Lost Things

By Linda Rex

September 11, 2022, PROPER 19—The other day I drove downtown to do something at the Howard Office Building. I used my GPS to remind me of how to get there, but as I was leaving the parking lot to head home, I decided I could find my way home without help. About ten minutes later, I realized I was headed the opposite direction from where I needed to go, and that I was thoroughly lost. Grumbling with frustration, I finally pulled over and got out my phone for directions to get back home.

Being lost means that fundamentally, underneath all of the lostness, lies the reality that one has a home to return to. There are some people today who do not have a home to return to—they long for a home, a place of settled rest where they are beloved and safe. Others have a house, but it's not much of a home. They may have a place to live, but there is no sense of welcome or peace in that place they go to after work each night. Some of us are simply looking for a spiritual home—a place where all the time, we are accepted, loved, welcome, and included.

In the gospel reading for this Sunday, Luke 15:1–10, we find Jesus feeling right “at home” with tax collectors and sinners—people that the Pharisees and scribes of that day excluded from the community of faith. Jesus included them in his life, fellowshiping with them, and drawing them close into relationship with himself in spite of their failure to live up to the expectations of their religious leaders. These people who had no spiritual home were finding their home in Jesus, and he wanted the leaders to understand that if anyone was really lost in the situation, it was those who believed they were already found.

Receiving criticism for welcoming tax collectors and sinners, Jesus began a series of parables about lostness and foundness. He told a story of a shepherd who had a hundred sheep, one of which had wandered away. This good shepherd knew each of his sheep so well that he was very aware when one of them left the flock. So, he put the others in the care of those who would watch over them, and went to find the lost sheep. His purpose was to bring the lost sheep back home, to be cared for and kept safe with him. He took whatever risks were necessary, took however long it took, and endured whatever deprivations, struggles, and suffering were required so he could bring home the single sheep that was lost.

Significantly, the shepherd's attitude about the whole process, in spite of the inconvenience to himself, was joy. He didn't lash out at the sheep when he found it, nor did he reject the sheep for what it did by wandering away. Instead, the shepherd picked up the poor bedraggled sheep, wrapped it around his neck to carry it on his shoulders, and made himself fully responsible for its care. He did the heavy work of bringing the sheep home and making sure it was safely back in the sheepfold.

This is such a profound picture of our Lord and what he has done for us in his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. As our Good Shepherd, he was willing to set aside the comforts and privileges of his divine home for a time in order to find us in our humanity in the wilderness of evil, sin, and death, to bring us back home to our Father. As we read in Hebrews 12:2, Jesus willingly and joyfully underwent this self-offering for our sakes, finding us in our lostness, and in spite of the supreme cost to himself, bringing us to safety and rest in his Father's arms.

What Jesus brought the Pharisees' and scribes' attention to was that the shepherd in this story was not focused on the failure of the sheep to stay in the sheepfold. There was no condemnation of the sheep for having wandered off. The concern of the shepherd was for the wellbeing of the sheep, of its need to be brought back home, back into the fold, not to be punished or excluded for how it failed to obey the expectations of the shepherd. He was simply rejoicing that the sheep was once again home, back with the other sheep, where it belonged.

The Lord has been showing me more and more how we as humans love to create divisions between “us” and “them”, especially religious ones. We differentiate between those who are in and those who are out. If someone doesn't measure up to our expectations of holiness or of the Christian life, we exclude them from our relationships. Instead of this, we need to realize our own lostness and need for a shepherd, and

treat them as the brothers and sisters they are. The human race as a whole was included in Christ's self-offering, and that means that at any moment, we may be and are the lost sheep he is joyfully bringing home on his shoulders.

I love the next story Jesus told, about the woman who lost a coin. She searched all over her house, sweeping the dirt floor and crooks and crannies, trying to find the small piece of metal. Obviously, the woman would not have been so diligent in her search unless that coin was very important to her. Was it a part of her dowry? Was it her only hope for a morsel of food that week? She even used some of her precious lamp oil to try in her dark house to see where the coin had gone.

Today, when we drop a penny, we may not be as diligent in our retrieval of this small coin. But the coin in this story had a place where it belonged—in the care of the woman. This coin was not meant to be lost and all alone in some forgotten space in the house. It was meant to be a part of the collection of ten coins that she was keeping for a specific purpose. Her joy at the finding of the coin reflects the same joy that the shepherd had upon finding his sheep. She was so delighted about finding her lost coin that she shared the good news with everyone around her.

What a different response compared with the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes! Isn't this what our response ought to be when Jesus goes to work to bring a "lost coin" home? Shouldn't we be equally delighted to share the good news with others of what Jesus has done for us in his finished work as our Lord and Savior? Instead of the critical and negative response Jesus experienced from the Jewish leaders of that day, he should have received joyful gratitude and celebration for bringing the "lost coin" tax collectors and sinners into relationship with himself, and thereby bringing them home to our Father.

Over the years, as I have had many different experiences with God helping me find what I've lost, he's become for me the Finder of All Lost Things. Indeed, Jesus still is the One who seeks out the lost and brings us all home to his Father. And Jesus includes us in his mission of finding all lost sheep and all lost coins—of finding all who are longing for a spiritual home. He invites us to be a part of the process of helping others see their home is in him. We can get out our lamps and begin looking for the "lost coin" alongside the Finder of All Lost Things by joyfully including family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances in our life with Christ. Together we can celebrate our common return home on the shoulders of our Shepherd, rejoicing with Jesus as he brings us all home to the Father.

Thank you, Good Shepherd, for the extent to which you have gone to bring each of us home to be with you forever. Thank you for searching for us in the wilderness of our humanity, seeking each one of us out and including us in the Triune life and love. O great Finder of All Lost Things, grant us the grace to remember our own lostness and foundness in Jesus as we include each and every person in our own celebration of all you have done to bring us safely home. Amen.

"Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.' So He told them this parable, saying, 'What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!" I tell you that in the same way, 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, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and 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 which I had lost!" In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.' " Luke 15:1–10 NASB

See also 1 Timothy 1:12–17; Psalm 51:1–10; Psalm 14.