

Being Found in the Kingdom of God

This is another of those mornings when there's a whole lot going on. We're in the second week of the Season of Creation, joining our fellow Christians worldwide in praying for our beloved Earth. It's September 11th, the twenty-first anniversary of terrorist attacks on New York City, Arlington, Virginia and Shanksville, Pennsylvania. We join the world in mourning the recent passing of Elizabeth II, the Queen and head of the Church of England who embodied grace, stability and devotion to duty at a time when such virtues are too rarely on display.

So we begin with the Gospel, seeking to discern what Jesus might have to say to us this morning. Our passage finds Jesus being criticized yet again by the Pharisees and scribes, this time over the company he keeps. Having attracted all the tax collectors and sinners in town, Jesus welcomes and eats with them. The righteous Pharisees and scribes grumble, offended – and maybe a little jealous – that Jesus is so friendly with such disreputable folk. In response, Jesus tells them three parables, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which appears just beyond today's passage. All three are stories of the joy of finding something precious that was lost. But for this morning, let's focus not on finding, but on being found.

When Jesus says that the lost sheep and the lost coin have been “found,” he uses a derivation of the Greek word εὐρίσκω (heuriskó). It means “to find,” but it's also the root for being found, being seen, being present, discovered and recognized. So being found in one of Jesus's parables isn't necessarily just about being spotted by someone who's looking for you. It can also be about being *recognized*, fully seen and understood by the One who seeks us out.

It's easy to lump these parables together as three variations on the same theme, but they have some important differences. It's also easy to see the lost sheep and the coin as mere

preludes to the prodigal son, but that undervalues the lessons today's parables teach. Let's start with the coin. Bible scholar Joel B. Green says the coin is worth a full day's wages, one of ten coins that might have been the woman's dowry or her family's savings. She has ample reason to look for it when she believes it's missing. But, to paraphrase one of my favorite seminary professors, Dr. Marc Jefferson, the coin is never really lost. It's in the woman's house the entire time, safe from tarnish and robbers until she eventually sweeps it up and returns it to her stash.

The lost sheep is something else again. The poor creature has enough autonomy to wander away and get lost in the wilderness, so that the shepherd leaves the rest of the flock to go out looking for it. Jesus tells us that the shepherd lays the missing sheep on his shoulders and rejoices when he finds it. The sheep, lost in the wilderness, is probably frightened and confused. Being back in its shepherd's care, cradled on his shoulders and soothed by his familiar voice, must have been very reassuring. The sheep, too, must have rejoiced in its own ovine way.

Both parables tell us that Heaven rejoices when a sinner repents. The Greek word that Jesus uses for repentance is μετανοέω (metanoia). The Hebrew word for repentance is תשובה (teshuvah), which literally means turning back to something from which you've looked away. According to Reverend Rob Myallis, μετανοέω is derived from תשובה, but it also suggests that "reflecting on a situation causes one to have a change of attitude that leads to a change of behavior." Taken together, Jesus is saying that the angels in Heaven rejoice when a sinner, reflecting on his or her misdeeds, comes to a change of mind and heart that inspires the sinner to turn away from sin and back to God.

The Pharisees and scribes most likely find these parables objectionable. They consider themselves to be so righteous that they'll never need to repent. They probably think the angels

should be rejoicing over their righteousness, not jumping up and down in glee because some miserable sinner finally got it right for a minute or two.

A lot of people still think that way today. Only the righteous, as they understand righteousness, are deserving of praise. Sinners are irredeemable and deserve eternal punishment. No cheap grace, please – just perpetual disgrace and shame. It's lucky for us, and for them, that Jesus disagrees. He knows that each and every one of us is going to stray from the straight and narrow path again and again, often without even knowing it. Heaven would be empty if only the perfectly righteous were allowed in. Thankfully, though, perfect righteousness is not the ticket through the Pearly Gates. If we reflect on our misdeeds, have a sincere change of heart and turn away from them and back to God, champagne corks pop all over Heaven.

Paul's letter to Timothy is instructive here. A self-confessed former blasphemer, persecutor and man of violence, Paul undoubtedly considered himself to be very righteous before he took that tumble on the road to Damascus. But Jesus showed him mercy, making him "an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life." Paul may exaggerate when he claims to have been the foremost of sinners before his conversion, but he was no saint, either. If he could repent and be forgiven, so can we.

So, what do these parables mean for us? First, they assure us that we're never really lost in this world because, like the coin, we're always in our Master's house. Second, we are never alone; God goes looking for us when we stray too far, rescuing us from whatever messes we get ourselves into. Third, it's never too late for us. Whenever we sin, and all of us do, we always have the freedom to repent, return to God, and give the angels an excuse to party.

That assurance also frees us to make amends for our misdeeds. Our reading from Jeremiah illustrates how the world is affected when our relationship with God goes wrong. Its

reference to a hot wind coming “out of the bare heights in the desert toward my poor people, not to winnow or cleanse – a wind too strong for that” bears an eerie resemblance to global warming. Jeremiah’s description of a world waste and void, a formerly fruitful land turned to barren desert, empty of life, may be where we’re heading if we don’t turn things around. When we treat the Earth as nothing more than a pile of raw materials to be thoughtlessly squandered, our lack of love for the God who created it all is on full display. But if we stop, contemplate our abuse of the Earth and allow love for God to enter our hearts, we’ll experience μετανοέω. We’ll want to help heal and protect the Earth, not out of fear of punishment, but because we want to mend our relationship with God by treating his Creation with all the reverence it deserves.

These parables can go down hard when we think about those who sin against us. It’s difficult to imagine that the terrorists who planned and executed the murders of almost 3,000 Americans ever repented, in this life or the next. But Jesus taught us to ask God to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. If we understand that people who are capable of committing such ungodly crimes are truly, terribly lost, it may be a little easier to find enough love in our own hearts to pray that they might someday repent and be forgiven.

Being found by God can be uncomfortable for those of us who prefer always to put our best foot forward. Knowing that the Creator of All Things sees right through you and is intimately familiar with every wart, fault and flaw you have can be very, very humbling. But it can also be very freeing. When you finally understand that God recognizes your imperfect human self and loves you exactly as you are, you can relax because you’re safe. You can acknowledge your past mistakes without being tortured by them, and forgive yourself for the mistakes you make while you’re turning things around. We all can. And when we do, the angels will rejoice. *Amen.*