

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 15:1-10

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The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin are addressed to the audience by Luke the storyteller as Pharisees and scribes who were complaining about Jesus' life style and his welcoming of tax collectors and sinners. The parables are about God's love and mercy for sinful human beings and of Jesus' steady ministry of engagement with those who did not observe the law, who were sinners. They are about his call for repentance and conversion.

Jesus' call to repentance and conversion was not primarily about religious observance and following the law. It did not exclude that, but that was not the primary focus. His call for conversion was focused on turning our heads around and attending exclusively to God's kingdom, to the characteristics of God's government in the world. That also meant the conversion of the heart and a change of attitudes in regard to various people in the world—particularly those who were despised and condemned by the righteous folk.

The first parable—the parable of the lost sheep—is addressed to people who knew about shepherding, herding and taking care of sheep. Sheep are uniquely stupid animals that have very little brains and are totally dependent on a shepherd to take care of them. When a sheep gets lost, it's a life-and-death matter. They can't save themselves. They can't find their way back. They have very low intelligence, no sense of location. They are nowhere near as smart as dogs. They are really dumb.

So sheep are an excellent metaphor for human beings who frequently have that same character; that is, they get lost and simply have no way of getting back to health, to wholeness. This is particularly true in relation to the epidemic of addiction present in the world now. We stupid humans get addicted to all sorts of things. Alcohol is our number one addiction, but there are also addictions to nicotine and drugs, gambling, sex, food, to all sorts of destructive substances and behaviors. These are addictions that people seem to be powerless to do anything about once they are caught.

This parable is about God's initiative in seeking the lost, seeking those who have lost their way and who are trapped in a syndrome of dependence and self-destructive behavior. The term "sinners" has lost its comprehensive meaning in our culture. It is not a term that can be used widely, but it is descriptive of the human situation. This parable is about the character of God as one who seeks the one who is lost. It's like a shepherd who has a hundred sheep and one gets lost. In this parable, he leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness and goes after the one who is lost. He's willing to take the risk of losing others for the sake of this one who's lost.

In Luke's version of this parable, when he finds the sheep, he picks it up and puts it on his shoulders. So this is also a parable of strength. A sheep is a hefty animal. It is not easy to pick up a sheep and put it on your shoulders, especially a full-grown sheep. This, then, is

gesture of great strength and of joy. This story needs to be told with real gusto. When the man gets home with his sheep he calls all his friends and neighbors to rejoice.

The parable is significantly about the rejoicing. The rejoicing described here is probably a hyperbole in relation to what actually happened when a shepherd found a sheep. You wouldn't go home and call the entire town and have a huge celebration just because you found one sheep. But that is typical of Jesus' parables. They are all characterized by some form of either hyperbole or reversal of expectations. The hyperbole of this parable is the extent of joy that is expressed and experienced in the telling of this parable. So that's what one wants to do in the telling of the parable: make the celebration really big, way over the top. You can't over-exaggerate the joy that is present.

Rejoicing is not just over the sinner who is found, but also over the sinner who repents, who changes his ways. It's a recommendation of a lifestyle. I thought of this last week. A friend who's done work at our house and who I've gotten to know told me that he'd been out of work for a while because he'd gone into rehab for alcoholism. He had not had a drink for three months; staying sober was a day-by-day matter for him. I came close to going over the top in celebration of what he had done, having learned from this parable.

The story of the lost coin has the same spirit, but a different frame of identification. The shepherd is moderately rich. One hundred sheep was less than what would be considered rich, but more than being poor. The woman has only ten silver coins. In order to protect them a woman would usually wear them on her headdress. In this parable she is not named as a widow, so it may be that she had a husband, but she clearly was poor.

The woman lived in a house without windows and so when a coin was lost in the house, she had to light a candle because there was no light in the house. Also, the dirt floor indicates poverty. To clean it you'd get an evergreen branch to sweep the floor because a coin that would fall on the floor might be covered by the dirt. The losing of a coin like this for a poor woman was an absolute tragedy. It was the source of enormous anxiety and panic, and so finding the coin was an occasion for great joy.

The end of each parable describes the protagonist calling for all the people of the town to come and celebrate. The sound structure of both of these parables is moving from loss and panic and anxiety to great joy. This is a big crescendo of sound that goes from quiet to as loud as you can make it, as joyous, triumphant and victorious as possible. That's the spirit of this parable and that's the spirit of the Kingdom of God. That kind of joy is the spirit of God. That's what the spirit of the story's telling as well as its content.