

Sermon: Parables about lost sheep, coins, and children

Luke 15: 1-32

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This is probably the dumbest question for a sermon opener, but have you ever lost something? Of course, we all have, and we get terribly annoyed when we can't find our glasses or keys or phone, or that address we've written down on a dinner napkin.

I remember the moment I realized that I could not find my wallet - with my green card in it. Never mind all the credit cards, driver's license, and money. This was my worst nightmare come true. My brain already went to "how in the world am I going to go about replacing that green card?"

Or imagine how the famous, internationally famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma must have felt when he lost, for about two worry-some hours his 2.5 million dollar cello. The taxi driver who took him to the hotel after a performance at Carnegie Hall, pulled away from the curb with the instrument still in the trunk. After some phone calls it was safely returned.

Or imagine the London officials who found a bag of two human skulls in a bag on a train. Of course they were alarmed by the grizzly find but the skulls turned out to belong, quite legitimately, to an university professor who used them in lectures.

But there is still this stuffed puffer fish - just one of the items waiting to be reunited with careless owners who left them behind on trains, buses, and taxis in London.

Losing things are such a pain. How much time have we wasted in life to find things? Too much. And yet it is a common experience for us living today and for the people who heard Jesus' parables.

I know it is a tall order to deal not just with one parable but with three. Jesus tells the story about a shepherd who lost a sheep, a woman who lost a coin, and a father who lost not one, but two sons.

And as traditional reflections on Luke 15 go, we are the lost coin, the lost sheep, or the one who wandered off, leaving house and family for good. And, like a kind shepherd or a persistent woman or the gracious father, God searches for us until God finds us, and welcomes us back into the fold.

I kept the three parables together as a unit because of the theme about loss and escalation of loss.

The shepherd loses 1 % (one sheep), seemingly enough to make him go look for it; the woman loses 10 % of her saving – enough for her to waste precious oil to look for the one coin; and the father celebrating with a lavish feast that 50% of his family, his retirement/life's security, has returned home.

Be it one 1 %, 10 %, 50 % - no loss is too little or too big for God not to pay attention to.

That is just the crazy God we love and can call our own.

Another way to look at the passages is identifying with the kind shepherd and the persistent woman or grateful parent.

What if we see ourselves as the searching person who has lost something? Jesus himself asks in the parables: Who among you, if you have lost something valuable to you, does not go and look for it until you find it?

If it's valuable to us - which lies in the eye of the beholder - of course we go and look it.

Jesus assumes that if we have lost something valuable to us, we will go and search until we find it, or something to replace it.

So, if you don't mind, let's go into that direction.

We all know what loss feels like. We are annoyed when we lose things –like stuff- and there are losses that are devastating and leave us totally hopeless.

These passages intend to speak of the loss of something irreplaceable and of inestimable value. The shepherd and the woman search for the sheep and the coin out of love and concern for what cannot be replaced. And, like the father in the parable, we all know what it's like to have lost someone we really loved.

I suppose our minds go there with Luke 15 because, irrespective of the usual painful losses we experience, we are living in a time that is characterized by loss. We've lost money. We've lost jobs. People are losing houses. We've lost respect in the public square. We call names better than we work together. In the present-day political landscape, things have degraded into such shrill abrasiveness. And, while the world

cries out for solutions, it seems that we've lost the art of holding hands and have perfected the art of taking sides.

And, a place that you'd usually expect to be a refuge from such ugliness, even religion, has also become the landscape for name-calling and even worse. Fundamentalists from Christianity and Islam and Judaism seem hell-bent on driving the car right into the ditch, threatening to blow up other people or to burn up other people's Holy Books. We've lost our sense of kindness. We've lost a sense of confidence that things will get better and that the generations coming after us will automatically prosper more than we, just like we prospered more than the generations that handed things to us.

When you pile all of this together, it's not a pretty picture. You take the normal losses of life - divorce, death, health- and add to them the unique kind of losses we are experiencing these days, economically and politically, and it's not fun. People are hurting. High unemployment, shrinking wages, bad air, high crime, long commutes, depressed housing. We are dealing with loss in elegant ways.

Now you know why I think of us today more as a shepherd or a woman than as a sheep or a coin. We are able to enter the sadness of the father who lets his son go. We're all searching, because we all know what it's like to lose.

That's why hope is so important. And, that's what wants to be said here. There is hope. When you have lost and are searching, there is hope.

The kinds of losses we are dealing with are infinite in their variety, but I suspect there are precious few of us who are not dealing with loss these days in some pretty important ways. A job is gone. A relationship is broken. An income is down. A child is wayward. A home is foreclosed upon. A horizon is shrunk. A ceiling is lowered. A parent is dying. A loved one is ill. I suspect that most of us have some current story of loss to tell. And, what wants to be said and needs to be said is that there is hope.

Now, I'm not naïve enough to think that hope means that we can have just what we've lost in the form we want it. I've lost some things that I will never hold again. But, what I do know is that losing does not have to have the last word.

If a relationship ended, and if that relationship brought me love, the end of that relationship does not mean the end of love in my life. Loss is real. But, so is patience and persistence and determination. They are real, too. And, if the shepherd never finds the sheep, perhaps the shepherd runs across a deer in need of tending. And, if the woman never finds the coin, perhaps she finds a pearl. Or if the son does not come back into the fold, there might a youth that needs a little love and might become part of the family.

You know what I'm saying? You can have what you wanted when you lost what you had. You just have to keep searching and digging and believing and hoping and faithing and trying.

I'd like to share a quote on hope by Peter J. Gomes: "Hope is a slippery word and particularly so when it is used in connection with the future and as an antidote to anxiety and fear, but it is just hope that people require in facing their futures; and hopes greatest power is that it enables the present by embracing the future. The essence of the good life for which this age seeks is that hope is worthwhile, worth living for, worth waiting and working for. Hope does not deny the circumstances of the present, and hope doesn't help to get us out of our difficulties. Hope doesn't get us out, but it does get us through." [The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart (New York: Avon Books, 1996), 205.]

And what better place for the church to be: a place of hope. I think it is actually what the church is and is there for. That's what our communities of faith are called to be. We're the spaces where we hold one another in our losses and encourage one another in our searching and in our digging and in our believing and in our hoping and in our faithing and in our trying.

And, in the face of loss, which visits every human person, we need to be tender with one another and prop one another up and hold one another well and encourage one another strongly until our losses are absorbed and until--notice that I said "until" and not "if"--until we have found again what we wanted when we lost what we had. Amen