

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 11, 2022**

**“Rejoice with Me”
Luke 15:1-10**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

In our Gospel Lesson this morning, we hear two parables—which, at first, might seem conventional or reasonable; and yet, the longer we linger with these two stories, the stranger and more surprising they become.

“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?” (v. 4). This might sound a bit like a nice, heartwarming tale—except, did you notice what the shepherd did in order to seek that one lost sheep? He abandons ninety-nine “in the wilderness” (or, as the Greek can also be translated, “in [a] deserted place” [ἔρημος]). Some of you may remember an old hymn that begins, “There were ninety and nine that *safely lay in the shelter of the fold*” (Clephane)—but that is precisely what’s *not* described by the parable; that’s exactly what *doesn’t* happen. A key point here is that the 99 are *not* safe, *not* protected; the shepherd leaves them alone and vulnerable. If they were “safe in the fold,” then the shepherd wouldn’t be taking any risk; really, he’d simply be increasing his flock from 99 to an even 100. But that’s not the story; this shepherd takes an enormous risk; if things go sideways, his flock will be reduced from 99 to what? To 1, if he finds the lost sheep? Or to zero, if he doesn’t?

Isn’t that remarkably irrational behaviour? Highways and byways were notoriously dangerous in the first century, and yet this risk-taking shepherd leaves himself and his flock exposed to danger. Think of this behaviour transposed to just about any other context... Imagine in business: “Which one of you, having 100 accounts, and losing the business of one of them, does not call up the other 99 and say, ‘For as long as it takes, I’ll no longer be servicing your account; you’re dead to me,’ and then reallocates all company resources to recovering the business of that one lost account.” What? It doesn’t make sense; risk the entire flock on the outside chance of recovering one sheep?

But that’s not all! Did you notice the cut-off point—or, rather, the lack of a cut-off—for this dangerous undertaking? The shepherd “leave[s] the ninety-nine in the wilderness,” Jesus says, “and go[es] after the one that is lost

until [ἕως] *he finds it*” (v. 4). A reasonable or rational shepherd wouldn’t risk the flock for one sheep, but—if the shepherd is gonna take this risk—he could at least put a limit on it; “I’ll give it to sundown; if not, I tried...” But no, this shepherd will risk the flock—and continue risking the flock—*until* he finds that one sheep.

Isn’t that strange? This shepherd is disproportionately concerned, obsessively concerned, with some single, solitary sheep. Endangering 99 for 1, this shepherd is either remarkably bad at math, or he’s so profoundly committed to the one lost sheep that he’s willing to “risk everything” (Craddock)—his flock, his livelihood, his life—just for a chance to bring that sheep home.

Jesus tells a second parable: “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?” (v. 8). As the scholar Barbara Reid points out in her wonderful lectures on feminist biblical interpretation, this parable has often been ignored in the church or subject to sexist interpretations; and yet here, in this often-overlooked parable, we find this same absolute singlemindedness, that same relentless desire to find what has been lost. In this parable, the woman has lost a particular type of ancient coin, which was a significant sum: roughly—converting the currency and adjusting for 2000 years of inflation—this coin would be something like a \$100 bill.

It’s certainly not a trivial amount—and, as the parable specifies, this is about 10% of her life savings. She has \$1000 to her name, and this is a tenth of that; now somehow the coin, a tenth of her savings, has gone missing...and she *will* find it. Barbara Reid—that same scholar I mentioned—she writes: “The woman spends all this time, energy, looking, sweeping, using up her precious olive oil in the lamp, looking, looking for that lost coin because it’s so important.” And yet again, there’s no time limit; there’s no plan to look for a week and then call it quits; she will seek “until”—it’s the same word in the Greek as with the shepherd (ἕως)—“until she finds it” (v. 8).

And then, in each parable, something even more unexpected happens: it’s those two very strange parties. For the shepherd, we hear: “When he has found [the sheep], he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost’” (vv. 5-6).

Now, considering his irrational and risky behaviour, this party seems odd; he abandoned his vulnerable flock and risked everything, all alone, looking for one sheep that—for all he knew—could've already been dead... So when he returns from that reckless, foolhardy errand, you'd think he'd keep quiet about it. That's usually what we do when we behave recklessly and yet—despite our stupid behaviour—somehow manage to avoid the worst (cf. Schertz): if you drive needlessly through a blizzard, or if you go rock climbing without your harness, you wouldn't usually throw a party about it afterward. And yet, not so for this very strange shepherd, who proudly announces, “Guess what, everybody! I risked my entire flock for some random sheep! Party at my house!”

And likewise for the woman seeking the coin: “When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost’” (v. 9). On a couple of levels, this is also a rather strange basis for a party. If one of us lost money and then found it, we'd probably not want to announce that to everyone quite so gleefully—let alone have a party about it. I mean, what does one bring to a “‘Congratulations You Found Your Money’ party”? And of course, there's that rather pressing question of economics; if I lost a hundred-dollar bill, and then I invited all my “friends and neighbours” to celebrate, and ordered sushi for everyone and gelato, well, do you see the problem? The party will quickly deplete more than the money found...

These parables might at first sound familiar or conventional, until we linger with the details—and suddenly they appear to us strange and surprising. And yet in the strangeness, in the surprise, in these parables—woven through with this overflowing and endless longing to find what is lost—we are given a glimpse of the heart of God. One minister puts it like this: these parables reflect “the long, loving reach of God”—“[t]he God who will travel into the thicket to pull you out, the God who crawls into the hole you have dug for yourself and lifts you up and out” (Nixon). See, *we* cut our losses; we give up on ourselves and on others; we cut our losses, but not so with God—for whom “[t]he lostness of the human community is [...] a crisis” (Schertz). And so, in these stories—the shepherd risking everything, the woman stopping at nothing—in these images, we see a God who seeks unconditionally (cf. Franklin), who reaches out unremittingly, who searches for us tirelessly, and who—in finding us—celebrates extravagantly (cf. Schertz).

Both parables culminate with joy—a joy that resonates between heaven and earth: “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven,” Jesus says (v. 7); “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God” (v. 10). Both parables feature those odd parties that don’t make much sense in the context; yet it turns out that—in these strange, incongruous parties—we glimpse a God who so delights in finding us and restoring us that God celebrates from heaven to earth.

One writer puts it like this: “these parables are [...] about learning to rejoice. [...] [T]he movement of joy pulses outward from the one to the many, from the earth to the heavens. The party takes on a cosmic scale. Rejoicing itself [is] the goal toward which [the stories] move beyond the [...] moment of finding. Salvation consists [...] in being drawn into the eternal celebration” (Bader-Saye). That’s why the reckless shepherd throws his party, why the woman spends all the money she found to celebrate; this shepherd and this woman are images of God, for whom “the joy of finding [us] is so abundant that it cannot be contained” (Craddock).