

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 14, 2025**

**“Rejoice with Me”
Luke 15:1-10**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

This morning, we hear Jesus tell two parables. And although these parables might seem reasonable at first, the more we pay attention to the details, the more puzzling—and even strange—these parables become. Jesus says: “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).

At first, we want to say, ‘yes, of course!’—but listen to the details: did you notice what the shepherd does in order to seek that one lost sheep? He abandons ninety-nine sheep “in the wilderness,” in some “deserted place” [ἔρημος]. I’m sure some of you know an old hymn that goes, “There were ninety and nine that *safely lay in the shelter of the fold*” (Clephane); but that’s the exact opposite of what happens in this parable! When the shepherd runs off to look for that one sheep, he leaves all the rest unprotected, vulnerable to predators or other dangers. If the 99 had *actually* been “safe in the fold,” then the shepherd wouldn’t be taking a risk here; he would simply be increasing the flock from 99 to 100. But that’s not the parable; in this parable, the shepherd takes a drastic risk. He could lose those 99 on the off-chance that maybe—just maybe—he’ll save that one.

Now, is that not remarkably irrational behaviour? I mean, there’s risk-taking behaviour—and there’s there hazarding everything you’ve got on the one that got away. For comparison, think of what this behaviour would look like in, say, a business context. “Which one of you, as a business owner with 100 customers, and losing one of your customers, does not email the other 99 to say, ‘Until further notice I will no longer be servicing your account; you’re dead to me,’ and then proceeds to redirect all company resources toward winning back the business of that one lost customer.’ That just doesn’t make sense; you’ll lose your whole livelihood just trying to win back 1%!

Now you might think, ‘Well, maybe it’s not quite that bad; maybe the shepherd will look for a little while, and then—if the sheep can’t be found—he’ll return to the 99, right?’ No! Not this shepherd! This shepherd, Jesus says, “leave[s] the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go[es] after the one that is lost *until he finds it*” (v. 4). It’s clear in the original language here: the shepherd will look for the one missing sheep “until” he

finds, for “as long as” it takes (ἕως). A reasonable shepherd might leave the 99 just briefly; you know, ‘I’ll give it an hour—and if not, I tried...’ But not this shepherd: this shepherd will risk the flock—and keep on risking the flock—*until* he finds that one missing sheep.

Isn’t that strange? This shepherd is disproportionately—even obsessively—concerned with one single solitary sheep. He is so profoundly committed to the one lost sheep that he’s willing to “risk everything” (Craddock)—his flock, his livelihood, everything—just for a chance to bring that sheep home.

Then Jesus says: “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). In this parable, we encounter someone with that same relentless desire to find what has been lost. According to this parable, the woman has lost a particular silver coin that, in the ancient world, was quite valuable [δραχμή]. For the equivalent in today’s terms, it would be maybe something like a \$100 bill.

It’s a significant amount of money; this is not like misplacing a nickel. And what’s more, she has (or had) precisely ten of these. She had a thousand bucks to her name, and 10% of that has gone missing; that coin was worth one tenth of her savings, and she lost it! So what will she do? Will she *maybe* find it? No, she *will* find it. The biblical scholar Barbara Reid puts it like this: “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.” If she has to turn that house inside out, she will find that coin. And she won’t wait ’til daybreak, either; she’ll burn costly oil to keep that lamp lit—and look for her coin right now.

And also—again, just like the shepherd—there’s no time limit here on how long she will look for that coin. It’s not ‘look for a while, we’ll see, maybe it’ll turn up’; no, she will look for that coin, and seek that coin, “until”—it’s the same word in the original language as with the shepherd (ἕως)—“*until* she finds it” (v. 8).

Then something else happens in these parables that maybe seems reasonable at first—but again, in the details, it’s very strange. In the parable of the shepherd, it turns out he does find the lost sheep—and then this happens: “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 the shepherd’s risky behaviour, this party seems really odd; he abandoned his flock, risked everything, all to look for just one sheep—and, lucky for

him, it all worked out. Phewph. Now's a good time to tell *nobody*, right? You'd think he would keep quiet about this! That's usually what we do when we're reckless or foolish and somehow it pans out (cf. Schertz). Once—and this was not at this church—once, many years ago, I accidentally left my notes for a wedding on top of my car; I managed to get through the rehearsal by memory, and then I went out and scoured the highways until I found my folder. Do you think I threw a party to celebrate? No! Do you think I told the bride and groom? Also no! And yet, in this parable, we find the shepherd inviting everyone to celebrate his foolish behaviour. How strange!

And it's something similar with the woman seeking the coin: Jesus says, "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). Now that is a rather strange basis for a party. If you lost a \$100 bill—and then managed to find it—I don't think you'd go telling everyone, nor do I think you'd throw a party. (I mean, what does one bring to a 'Congratulations You Found Your Money' party?) But also, think about the financial side of this: if you lost a \$100 bill, then threw a big party for all your friends to celebrate finding that money...do you see the problem? You're gonna spend more money on the party than you found!

The longer we linger with these details, the more these parables begin to seem strange and surprising. And yet, in the strangeness, in the surprise, in these parables—woven through with this overflowing longing to find what is lost—in this, we get a glimpse of the heart of God. As one minister writes: 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 are not like that shepherd seeking his sheep or the woman seeking her coin—but God is. We cut our losses; we give up on ourselves and on others; we cut our losses, but not so with God. In these parables—the shepherd risking everything, the woman stopping at nothing—in these parables, we see a God who in Christ searches for us tirelessly, who reaches out to us relentlessly (cf. Franklin), and who—in finding us—celebrates extravagantly (cf. Schertz).

Both parables conclude with joy—joy that reverberates 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 include these very surprising parties that don't seem to make much sense to us; yet it turns out that—in these surprising parties—we glimpse a God who so rejoices in finding us and in restoring us that he celebrates from heaven to earth.

That's why the shepherd and the woman won't give up on finding what is lost; they are a glimpse of God who will seek us "until" he finds us. That's why the reckless shepherd throws his party, why the woman spends the money she found to celebrate; this shepherd and this woman are a glimpse of God, and—for God—the "the joy of finding [us] is so abundant that it cannot be contained" (Craddock). Amen.