

## Lost and Found

READ LUKE 15.

Jesus is teaching rather than healing at this point in his journey to Jerusalem. Sinners and prostitutes are coming to listen to him. Pharisees are grumbling that he eats with such people. The parables that lure sinners and prostitutes to seek out Jesus feature a shepherd's lost sheep, a woman's lost coin, and a father's lost son. The parables inspire compassion by singling out a shepherd's care for one lost sheep out of a hundred, the woman's value on the one coin lost out of ten, and a father's enduring relationships with two sons.

A single sheep apart from the flock is probably in danger, tangled in briars, caught in a crevasse, or young and not paying attention. Left behind, the sheep may die. The parable shifts importance to the one rather than the many and focuses on the value of each sheep. It seems outrageously risky to leave ninety-nine sheep on their own without worrying more will wander off or scatter. But the parable is a story with a point. The shepherd carrying the lost sheep on his shoulders is iconic of God's compassion and mercy for each person. The shepherd cannot help sharing with friends and neighbors the joy he feels in finding the one sheep. It illustrates the joy in one sinner turning to God.



Art/Marion Honors, CSJ

Similarly, the woman's search for one lost coin demonstrates how close to subsistence she lives that finding one coin matters. Her house must be small and windowless. She has to light a lamp and sweep to find the coin. The two parables are a parallel pair, one a man's example, one a woman's. Frequently Christians see statues and medals that illustrate Jesus as the compassionate shepherd, carrying the sheep he has searched out and found. Psalm 23 imagines and immortalizes God as a good shepherd. However, seldom do Christians draw the woman's parable and make images of God as the housewife trimming her lamp and sweeping with a broom until she finds the lost and precious coin. If the shepherd images God, so

does the determined housewife. Like the shepherd the woman celebrates her joy in finding the coin with friends and neighbors just as the angels celebrate a sinner who repents. The repetition in the two stories makes the message clear. Both end with joy in finding the lost, a joy the parable quickly ties to sinners who repent. Repentance restores life and forms community.

The story of the father with two sons is more complex and in the end asks an often neglected question—which son is lost? The parable is one most children know. The younger son wants his inheritance. The father obliges him. The younger son takes everything and pulls away from their father-son relationship by going to a distant country. There, as feared, he **“squandered his property in dissolute living”** (15.13). When a famine hits the country, he is so hard up he takes a job feeding pigs, animals unclean to Jews. He is so hungry that he would eat the pigs’ food if his employer allowed it. The young son hits bottom and rethinks his plight. **“When he came to himself, he said ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger. I will get up and go to my father’”** (15.17-18). The son has acted out his own independence, flopped, and hit hard times. Life apart from his family is not what the younger son imagined. He finds his lost self; he is the son of his father. But he cannot imagine reclaiming his son relationship, so he plans to admit his sin and ask his father to treat him as a hired hand.

The father has never stopped loving the son, sees him coming, feels compassion, runs to him, embraces, and kisses him. The father will not hear of making the lost son a hired hand but brings a robe, ring, and sandals for him

and orders the fatted calf to celebrate. **“Let us eat and celebrate for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found”** (15.23-24).

Luke’s three parallel stories set up the pattern of finding the lost and then rejoicing with friends and neighbors. But the family relationships in the third parable complicate the pattern. Restoring the lost son’s relationship to the father affects the older son who has no inheritance yet and who is working his father’s land that is half the size it once was. The music and dancing surprise the older son when he comes in from the field. The celebration angers him and he refuses to join in. The father goes out to the elder son just as he had to the younger one and invites him in. This obedient, hard-working son complains he has never received even a goat to celebrate with his friends. He receives no reward for his righteous living and obedient work for his father. In contrast, the son who wastes the father’s property on prostitutes gets a fatted calf. The older son sees his brother as a wasteful sinner but doesn’t question his own lack of compassion or his claim to privilege for his righteousness. Often in families one child demands or needs more attention than another or than all the rest. The father tenderly affirms his unbroken relationship with his eldest, **“Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours”** (15.31). But the father reminds his eldest that he has a brother and insists he must rejoice **“because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found”** (15.32). The parable doesn’t tell us what the older brother does. Going forward he will have to support his brother out of his own portion of the inheritance. The story is

about love, not math. The father's call echoes for hearers down the centuries, challenging us to forgive and restore the relationships in our lives. Joy irrepressibly breaks out when relationships mend and joy must be shared.

Sinners and prostitutes are listening to Jesus because his parables communicate caring about each person singly and seeking out the lost. Remorse and forgiveness restore relationships and make a new life possible. The father's love is God's love, which has no measure or price.



- 1 What or whom have you lost and found to great rejoicing? How did you celebrate?
- 2 What is the coin you are searching for?
- 3 Who are you more like—the younger or the older son?
- 4 What name best describes the parable? The parable of the merciful father? The parable of the prodigal son? The parable of the righteous son?
- 5 What does Jesus teach us about God in these parables?