

Today Jesus tells us two parables. In the first one, a shepherd with 100 sheep on a hillside is missing one of those sheep. So, off he goes to find it and, when he does, he slings it over his back to bring it home. He then calls together his friends and neighbours to have a party to celebrate. And Jesus says there will be a big party like that in heaven over the one sinner who repents rather than for the 99 righteous people who didn't need to repent.

Next, we hear about a woman who had lost one of her 10 silver coins. She searched high and low – lit her lamp so she could see better, swept every inch of her floor and, when she found the coin, she calls together her friends and neighbours to rejoice with her in a party to celebrate. And again, Jesus says, there will be a party like that in heaven for the one sinner who repents.

People and preachers through the centuries have gone with the obvious interpretation...the shepherd and woman in the stories, well, they're Jesus – or God – searching for the "lost", or those who need to repent and then rejoicing when they are found (when they repent). Easy to figure out, right? Well, there are actually a few things amiss if we try to look at the parables that way. A rule of thumb I've learned about Jesus' parables is that they are meant to shake people up, shock them a little. So, if the point to a parable seems easy and rather tame, then there is a different point we need to discover.

Let's look at the parables again and figure out what message Jesus is sending us. First, Luke lets us know that Jesus is telling these parables to the Pharisees and scribes. They've just complained that Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them.

Instead of directly answering their complaint about him, Jesus tells them these stories. We need to remember that – these stories are for the Pharisees.

Jesus starts by asking which one of them would not leave their 99 sheep unattended to go off in search of one sheep who had wandered away. The short answer to that is **no one**. Anyone who leaves their sheep alone to search for one will, at the end of the day, only **have** one sheep. For a shepherd to leave his or her flock alone was absurd. And the absurdity doesn't end there. When the shepherd finds his sheep, Jesus says he slings it over his back to bring it home. Now, the Awassi sheep in Israel weigh upwards of 200 lbs and they don't **like** to be picked up and carried. Picture **that** absurdity.

Now, let's look in on the woman in the other parable for a moment. She has 10 silver coins and one is missing. She lights her oil lamp in order to look for it then throws a party for her friends when she finds it. Hmm...so she **spends** money burning oil to **look** for money and then she spends **more** money on a party when she finds her money. It doesn't make sense.

Now we have a shepherd, sweaty and exhausted after catching and hefting onto his shoulders an uncooperative 200 lb sheep, whose 99 other sheep have wandered off or been stolen in the meantime. And, we have a woman who has just spent as much money as she was looking for. Ridiculous. Has Jesus lost his mind? No.

Let's rewind to what got this started. "Look at that guy," the Pharisees grumble. "He welcomes sinners and eats with them!"

We don't find this unusual because that is what we know about Jesus – he taught, he healed, he loved – to show people life in God's kingdom. Jesus embraced those who didn't know they could be a part of God's kingdom. God is love and desires us to be God's love as well. Jesus was doing that – Jesus was being God's love, welcoming everyone into the feast in God's kingdom. So, of course Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them – he desires to be God's love for them and show them the way to live in God's kingdom. So, of course, Jesus thought the Pharisees grumbling that he would do such a thing was absurd and he is pointing out their absurdity with some absurdity of his own.

He tells them two unrealistic stories, crazy stories meant to grab their attention and pull them towards his point. What is his point? Jesus says it twice...“there will be more joy in heaven over the one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who have no need of repentance” and then again, “there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

But wait a minute...there's a problem with this punch line. Who repented? I didn't hear the sheep say sorry to the shepherd. The sheep was happily munching on grass and didn't know he was lost in the first place. And the coin – well, a coin **can't** repent. Did Luke put the wrong punch line with the wrong parables? Is he losing it? No, Luke isn't out of his mind anymore than Jesus was. Jesus wants **someone** to repent.

The woman who lost the coin gives us a clue...“Come help me celebrate that I found the coin I had lost,” she says.

Picture for a moment 100 sheep milling about on a hillside. Would you know if there were just 99? No. Maybe the coins would be easier – there are just 10 of

them, after all. [show two piles of coins. Do they look the same? Can you tell how many are in each pile just by looking? No] So, the shepherd and the woman had made a deliberate effort to count what they had.

Let's remember that the Greek word for "repent" means a change of heart. It is not about regret or guilt or shame; repent means to make a decision to turn around, to face a new direction. Jesus is asking people to turn around and face God. Remember, also, that Jesus is telling these parables to the Pharisees.

People and preachers tend to lump the Pharisees into one group, thinking that the gospel writers want us to see the Pharisees against Jesus – the Pharisees are bad, Jesus is good. Not all Pharisees were "bad" just like not all who call themselves Christians are "good." Jesus was talking to the Pharisees who had gotten sidetracked away from God – the ones who wanted to be admired for their piety, the ones who were careful to tithe their dill and cumin but forgot to care for the widows and orphans, the ones who thought they were guaranteed a place in the kingdom simply because they were a child of Abraham.

How easy it is to list our worldly accomplishments – to value what the world values. How easy it is to tithe our dill and forget the orphans. Jesus cares about the Pharisees – they were invited to feast in God's kingdom just as we are but not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord" will enter the kingdom.

It is important to accomplish things in this world. It is important to tithe our dill – as well as help the widows and orphans – **every** good thing we do matters. But everything must be done with our face turned toward God. **That** is the only way we will notice when we have lost something.

So Jesus wants the Pharisees – and all who hear his good news of God’s arriving kingdom – to repent, to turn their lives toward God. There is another important piece to his message though.

“Come help me celebrate that I found the coin I had lost,” the woman says. She and the shepherd are taking stock, keeping tabs, noticing when something has gone astray. We and the Pharisees are being reminded that we are to be living lives of action – noticing and helping others who are lost, calling these people into relationship with God in God’s kingdom.

Life with God is life in relationship – not just with God but with all of God’s creation. Our faith is personal but it is not private. Faith cannot ever be only between us and God. God exists in community – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – in a relationship flowing from the love that is God. We, too, exist in community. Love that is not shared, is not love.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin writes, “The universalism of the Bible consists in this: it shows us that God's saving purpose is addressed to the whole of his work in creation and to the human person, who has his real being only in his participation in this whole work. Salvation is a making whole and therefore it concerns the whole.”<sup>1</sup>

God desires that all of his creation be saved – the whole of the creation he looked upon and saw that it was good. In Jesus, all things – us included – are reconciled to God, given the opportunity in spite of our imperfections, to be in relationship

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<sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin. *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Kindle Locations 1105-1107). Kindle Edition.

with our Creator. But we have also been given the task to continue the reconciling work of Jesus – to let people know they have this amazing opportunity. We are, as Paul calls us, ministers of reconciliation.

Jesus says, “Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Let us call together our friends and neighbours that they may rejoice with us. It’s time to start the party.