

*Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!*

*So Jesus told them this story: “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away! Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.”*

What do you value most? These two parables illustrate the joy of having recovered something of value. Actually I find both parables a bit strange. Don’t you worry about the 99 sheep that have been left to fend for themselves while the man searches for the lost one?

And then the woman – she’s misplaced a coin that had the value of a day’s wage for a skilled laborer. Not insubstantial, but she had 9 more coins and she could have waited until morning to look for the coin rather than searching a dark house with a candle. I lost my church keys a couple of weeks ago and was in a bit of a panic because one of the two keys unlocks just about every door on the property. The other was my office door, the only replacement for which was in the church office, which required the property key. I looked and looked for those keys – emptied trash cans I hadn’t even been near, traced and retraced my steps, and bending down to look under the printer, I felt the keys in the waistband of my pocket-less trousers. You can bet I rejoiced, but I felt way too silly to tell everyone I met about finding my lost keys.

The writer of Luke is not talking about sheep or coins however; it is people – lost people – that are of value. The third and final parable in this chapter is about a person who loses his way – a younger son who is sick of life on the farm, asks for his inheritance and leaves for the big city. When he’s spent all his dad’s money and been reduced to eating the slop that the pigs eat, he crawls back to his father and asks for a job as one of his hired hands. The father is overjoyed, lavishes his lost son with the best of everything and throws him a big welcome-home party. Not so good for the loyal and hard-working older son, who understandably is jealous. Dad’s reply? Well you were always here and what I have is yours anyway. Meaning what exactly? It’s the usual response to criticize the older brother, who worked day in and day out without a word of appreciation or acknowledgment. “You were always around” says his father – small comfort. I relate to that older brother because in my family, I was him – my younger brother was the golden boy, handsome and charming. He was given cars, he wrecked them and he was given another. He landed in jail for drug possession and got bailed out. Lost, found, lost, found – ultimately lost young when his overworked liver failed him and left his three daughters without a father.

If someone here is wondering when I’m going to get around to talking about being lost and found as polite substitutes for the words “unsaved” and “saved,” I must disappoint you. Until, at the age of 16, I walked out of church forever, I spent way too much of my young energy being terrified of going to hell. All in all, I was baptized 3 times – never sure it would take, never sure if I was lost or found. What I now believe – have long believed - is

that the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of hell are what we personally and communally make of the precious life with which we are entrusted. Instead of talking about being lost or saved, I'd like to talk about the people who are lost to us because we take them for granted – and I'll give you an example of what I mean:

Walking home from the office recently, I saw, as I often do, the garbage collection truck on our street. For some reason, I was overwhelmed, felt a rush of gratitude to these men who take away the leftovers of our privileged lives. I mean, if you live in a house or an apartment, where someone takes your trash away every single week, that is privilege. I walked through the garden gate as a middle-aged man in the orange ESW uniform was struggling to move one of our "mixed waste" containers. It wouldn't budge. The man, who was not young, looked at me in frustration. He opened the container lid and we looked inside – someone had saved themselves a trip to the waste facility about 10 minutes away, and had filled the container two-thirds full of granite stones and dirt, leaving it to be magically carted away. Trash collectors do not exist to most of us, except when their trucks are blocking our cars. Before trash collection was privatized, a trash collector earned around €3,500 a month. Now that private companies take our trash away and recycle it, the average trash collector earns as little as half that much. Trash collection is big business – the recycling of plastics and other materials has attracted investors world-wide, investors like Bill Gates. Your local trash man can work his way up to around €3,000 a month, but that depends on his level of experience – that is, efficiency; let's say, speed, in picking up our leftovers. The granite stones in our trash container cost that worker more than just aggravation.

Why, you might ask, am I talking about trash collectors instead of the sermon text? Fact is, I am talking about what is lost and what is found – what we value and what we ignore. Every Sunday in my childhood church, the focus of every sermon was on "saving lost souls," all the while the "saved souls" practiced self-righteous racial and social discrimination, in direct conflict with everything Jesus tried to teach us about living "within the Kingdom of Heaven" here on earth. I am quite sure that being "saved" has no similarity to having reserved a lovely condo in heaven. As someone at our last Dinner Church, what Jesus was proposing was so radically different from "business as usual," it was bound to cause trouble. Jesus predicted it. Think of how dependent the economies of the United States and Germany are on weapons sales. The problem with capitalist markets is that they have no conscience and no ability to reason. They make a few people vastly rich, but they are lost. Every single great empire in human history has collapsed from its own top-heavy weight. Jesus challenges us to reason together, to do what we know is "the right thing to do."

What does it mean to be lost? Being lost is knowing what the right thing to do is, and not doing it. Every gospel and almost every other book in the Christian scriptures has its own version of this quote from John: Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin. But since you claim you can see, your guilt remains." Maybe the arms dealers of the world are spiritually blind. But their spiritual fate is really not our personal concern. It is we, who claim to see and who continue to be blind to our neighbors, who need to open our eyes. It isn't convenient. Our lives are so hectic; living with our eyes open is a challenge. Let's try it though. Let's help each other do it.

Amen