

The Parable of the Lost Car Keys: Luke 15-1-10

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No passage in the NT captures the theme of how to be included in the community of salvation more clearly than the fifteenth chapter of Luke. It contains these two parables, the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep, and of course the majestic Parable of the Prodigal Son. Taken together, these stories told by Jesus represent what has been called ‘the heart of the third gospel.’¹

These are stories about the lostness of human beings on the one hand, and on the other, the grace, kindness and unrelenting efforts of God to woo us back into the fold.

All the gospels build their representation of the life of Jesus around the idea that he came to call sinners to repentance.

***I came not to call the righteous, but the sinners to repentance* (Luke 5:32).**

And the context of these parables is just that idea: ***Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."***

They ***grumble....*** (διαγογγυζω, “complain”). They by some turn of thinking object to the inclusion of these poor lost souls in the community of salvation.

So he told them this parable... (Luke 15:1-3)

Christine and I have just returned from our wanderings through Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Washington and finishing up with one of the prettiest stretches of road of all, the 101 from Olympia to Port Angeles. 2400 km if Google is to be believed.

There are three cardinal rules to surviving this kind of travel, and I may be so bold to assert that they apply to all of life, at home and abroad.

- Always know where your wallet is
- your keys are
- and your sunglasses are

Especially when you are travelling about like we have just done. Things become lost when we depart from routine.

Wouldn't you know that one morning on the trip I could not find my car keys. It has the truck keys, the trailer keys, various locks on the rig and you must never lose your keys. So down the road we went, in a state of distress for me, without having found the keys.

I found them in the basket of dog toys at the next rest stop, having picked up dog toys from the campsite and inadvertently dropped my keys there as well.

How well I understood the rejoicing of the shepherd and the woman! That which is lost is found!

Everybody understands what Jesus is on about in this parable. It is an indication of the genius of our Lord's teaching – see how it reaches into the everydayness of life to teach us something profound.

And thus my sermon title, *The Parable of the Lost Car Keys*!

Simply put, the *finding of that which is lost* is the primary concern of the shepherd and the woman.

I came not to call the righteous, but the sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32).

So you have the shepherd, who leaves his 99 sheep safely in the fold, to look for the one that is lost. And on finding the lost sheep he ***...lays it on his shoulders rejoicing.***

The image suggests a shepherd dancing happily homeward with his recovered lost sheep. Rejoicing and joy are the motif!

Jesus interprets the parable for us with the phrase, ***Just so, I tell you....***
He says to his neighbors:

And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:6-7).

And so likewise with the woman with ten silver coins turns the house upside down to find the one she has lost!

Jesus says, ***"Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents"*** (Luke 15:10).

And next in this chapter, most importantly, how a father rejoices when a son who had been lost to him is restored in penance.

There are a few things to observe.

The first is that this seems to be an allegory. That is, the shepherd is a representation of Jesus, as is the woman (and, I think ultimately, the father in the story of the prodigal). The 99 sheep are an allegory of the community of salvation, safely within the fold.

This is another use of Jesus familiar device that says if something is true with people, how much more is it true with God (*a minori ad maius*).

This parable is a radical shift in how to understand relationship to God, and unlikely to endear him to the Pharisees and scribes.

In OT theology salvation is defined as being Israelite – the chosen people of God. And that is all you need. These Pharisees and scribes had taken it upon themselves to act as arbiters of who is worthy of inclusion or exclusion in Israel.

With Jesus, it isn't election that matters, being an Israelite that matters. *Repentance* is the means by which redemption functions for the individual – *even the Israelite*. No repentance leads to lostness and exclusion from the community of salvation.

The prophets had been saying this for centuries.

The community of salvation isn't a community of the elect of Israel, it is a community of those redeemed by repentance.

I came not to call the righteous, but the sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:32)² Can you see how this throws the doors of salvation open to everyone! Jew. Gentile. Sinner. Saint.

Jesus is saying that being lost or found depends on the posture of the heart, repentance, humility and grace are the means of being found. So... anyone who repents is a source of rejoicing to all the angels. As the prophets always said in the voice of God, your holy days and your ceremonies mean nothing to me. Give me your hearts – nothing less.

According to the biblical ideal, the shepherds [Samuel, Psalms, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Ezekiel e.g.] symbolize tender protection for the flock by God.

Jesus is the *perfect* shepherd and he will go to an extreme effort to seek out the lost one. Even through the path of the cross.

In fact, in a wrinkle, Jesus' parable is a not-so-subtle go at the "Pharisees and scribes" who grumble that Jesus spends his attention on the lost.³

Thus, in Ezekiel 34, God himself say, because you haven't done your work: ***I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat I will destroy*** (v 16).

God himself comes down from heaven. ***For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit... he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures.***

These parables are an allegory of God the Good Shepherd with us.

So, to review, the first thing is this, Jesus reconfigures the criteria for inclusion in Israel from election to repentance. Being lost or found, included or excluded from salvation, depends on the posture of the heart.

The second thing to note about these two parables is that they aren't about lostness, they are about the abundance of "foundness." 99 out of 100 sheep are found. This is a reference to the community of faith.

The tradition of this denomination is Wesleyan theology, which means that we celebrate the optimism of grace and the human responsibility to choose to belong to Christ, to respond to the gospel as a path to inclusion in the community of salvation. And... these parables show that Jesus was a Wesleyan.

This optimism has important implications for the way we see life and our relationship to others.

What if we look for the “foundness” in people instead of the lostness? What if we look for goodness in people and build on it? Could this not change *us*- and so help us change others?⁴

In is one of the great misconceptions of modern expressions of Christianity that it is our job as Christians to convince others they are sinners. That isn’t how Jesus operated. He wooed the lost.

There is such a thing as depravity. We have seen it in Saskatchewan this week. Uvalde, Texas. It’s not just mental illness.

There are still lost people in Jesus’ theology; but they are lost through their refusal to repent! It was an open invitation backed up by a shepherd seeking his lost sheep. Jesus was a Wesleyan.

There is here an important theological principle that shapes the way we see humankind: There is something stronger than sin, stronger than depravity. There is a better way to see our human relationships and our relationship to God than simply who is lost and who is found – that isn’t ours to judge anyway.⁵

The call of “foundness” is to everyone. You know that difficult person in your life? Look for foundness in them and built your outreach to them based on that.

I close this morning by returning to a passage we remarked a month ago in the message *The Ferment of Patience*. I’m pleased to see it come up in the lectionary, because I think it is a pretty important perspective.

Look at Paul’s extraordinary description of how he saw his own life – this from a man used by God more than anyone in history.

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life (1 Timothy 1:12-16).

This is the good news today. Our gentle, patient shepherd seeks us. Our part is to say, ‘Find me!’

Thanks be to God, amen.

¹ I believe it was the French scholar Louise Schotroff who coined this phrase.

² So you have this pattern that occurs in the story of Jesus’ life where he associates with the despicable element of society and the so-called righteous people in the story are offended that he should associate him self with the “sinners.” But it so happens, cleverly, that it is always the sinners who get Jesus.

³ In the prophets there is a searing critique of the worthless shepherds of Israel because they don’t care for their sheep. Jesus echoes Zechariah: “Woe to the worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock!” (Zech 11:17). And most severely, Ezekiel 34 the prophet castigates the shepherds of Israel, ***You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost... so they were scattered*** (Ezek 34:4-6). In one of the most beautiful descriptions of the role of a Good Shepherd, Ezekiel 34 goes on to say: ***For this says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.*** I will

- Seek (v 12)
- Rescue (v 12)
- Gather (v 13)
- Feed (v 14)

⁴ The two underlying principles of reform theology are total depravity wrought upon humanity by the sin of Adam and election to salvation or damnation, which is the height of the expression of the sovereignty of God. Take for example the hymn, At the Cross. When Isaac Watts penned those words in 1885, he wrote, "Would He devote that sacred head, For such a worm as I?" See *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin, Book II, Chapter 1.

⁵ There is exclusion from salvation for the wicked, as in Luke 13:22ff. As Jesus went from village to village someone asked him if only a few will be saved. He talked clearly about exclusion from salvation for the wicked, ***I don't know where you come from, go away from me all you evildoers!*** (13:27).