

## Of Sheep and Coins

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Before we get in to talking about this morning's scripture, I just wanted to mention a little bit about our centering song this morning. The name of the song is *Kyrie*. The lyrics are "Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison." The translation from Ancient Greek is "Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy." Very simple words, yet it can be a most powerful plea in our times of need, or our times of confession. That message of mercy is one that comes to us in the scripture this morning. It's both in the epistle reading, where Paul is writing in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy, and in the gospel where Jesus is sharing the parables of the sheep and of the coin.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy Paul is boasting, not about himself, but rather about how much mercy God has shown him. Think about it. Remember who Paul was when the evangelist who wrote the book of The Acts of the Apostles introduces us to Paul. Let's go down the list:

- He is first introduced to us as Saul
- He was a Pharisee
- He was educated in the Law and the Torah
- He was a Roman citizen
- He was a zealous and ambitious man by his own description
- He was a persecutor of those who followed Christ
- He was relentless in this pursuit, ousting and imprisoning many

It's those last two item on the list that catch our attention. Paul, formerly Saul, who is writing about and teaching and evangelizing for a life in Christ, was a persecutor of those who follow Christ. He does not shy away from sharing that fact.

Then, on the road to Damascus, this miracle happens. Saul, on his way to cast out, arrest, imprison, possibly even kill innocent Christians, is struck blind. In his blindness he hears a voice. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" We know the story. He travelled on to the place Christ told him to go, where he met a man named Ananias, sent to him by the Lord. Ananias laid hands on Saul and immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes. From that point on he became a new man with a new mission and a new name.

Paul became one of, if not *the* greatest Christian missionary in all of history. If not for Paul's transformation and zealousness for Christ, Christianity may not have spread as contagiously, rapidly, broadly, and powerfully as it did. Paul's profound ministry would not have happened if God hadn't stepped in.

But why do it in this way?

It's not because our God is a God of vengeance. It's because our God is a God of mercy. God cares for the least, the last, and the lost, and we all benefit from God's love.

Today is all about mercy. It's a simple message today. Because sometimes what we need from God is not complex theological diatribes about sacrifice and atonement and the humanity/divinity of Jesus Christ. Sometimes we just need simplicity.

When we look at the scripture, the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin are stories we are familiar with. They are stories that give us hope. We hold them close to our hearts. Yet, even in their simplicity, there is so much value and truth.

There was a point where I was thinking on these stories, especially the story of the lost coin. I thought, 'Well of course she's gonna go looking for that coin. That makes sense. That coin is worth a whole lot of money.' And then I dug down into my commentaries and looked up all the information I had on hand cause I wanted to make sure I had it right... And no... I didn't have it right.

That does happen sometimes. Sometimes we pastors get it wrong. A lot of times we pastors can get it wrong. But God forgives and loves and works through us anyway. Because God is merciful. God is just. God says, "We'll fix it."

But the idea of the lost sheep and the lost coin is this. God comes into our lives and God does it rejoicing. God is rejoicing over us. God is especially fully of rejoicing when we come to God. Jesus was illustrating our value to God in terms his disciples and the gathered people would understand.

The coin the woman lost? That coin would have been worth about a day's wages. The amount of money a person can make in a day is no small matter. It's not like she dropped a penny or a quarter or even a gold dollar in between the couch cushions. A day's worth of wages is a lot of money. Think of you get paid an hour or think of your salary. Break that down into what you'd get paid in a day. Would you wanna lose that money?

But then you think of what she had total. She had ten silver coins. She lost one. She still had nine silver coins. She lost a mere tenth of what she had. The nine coins was still a substantial amount of money. So, we can look at this in a cold modern metaphor. She earned ten coins, but she only got nine of them. For us that would be like receiving our paycheck minus the taxes automatically taken out. We're used to not receiving the full amount we earned.

That's not how her society worked though. Just because she had nine day's wages in silver coins doesn't make it any less concerning that one silver coin is missing. That's a tenth of her security that's gone missing. Would you just sit down and accept that a tenth of your security seemed to have wandered off? That money could be your groceries for the week. Maybe it's what you need to pay for your medicine. For this woman it could have been part of a dowry; and you don't want to misplace the dowry.

So, yeah, even though she still had the nine silver coins, that one missing coin was just as important as the nine she still had. So she searched all around her home. She lit every lamp in the house; and remember lamps in that day were oil based. That meant she was expending her oil supply to find this one coin. It couldn't wait till daylight hours. She was expending her energy,

too. She swept the house and likely looked under every piece of furniture, every bedding area, every corner and crevice of her dwelling until she found it.

This is also, likely, a traditional Jewish home. It's got four walls, a dirt floor, and no windows. She's not rushing through this. She is going painstakingly slow in order to make sure she's not missing the coin or covering it up. She's probably even down on her hands and knees feeling around while holding one of her oil lamps up and over every area she's scrutinizing.

Finally, she finds it. If it were us, we'd probably breathe easy, put the coin with the rest someplace secure, then collapse in a comfortable chair and will our bodies to release the tension and the stress of the search. She's not us.

Instead, she calls all her friends over. She didn't do a little happy dance. It's not like she just found \$20 in the pockets of her laundry. No, she invites all her friends over and brings them into her celebration, too. Because they all know the importance of the lost coin being found. They all know the importance of not losing one. Not one.

It's the same thing with the sheep. I wanna be clear going into this part of the scripture. I know absolutely nothing about sheep herding. But I'm assuming, when you're out with the sheep and you're trying to manage all these living creatures with minds of their own, one or two might escape your notice and disappear. I also don't know, when that happens if it was a normal practice to go searching for that one sheep, leaving the many unattended. Do you sacrifice the one for the many? Or do you indeed go after the lost sheep? Whatever the case may be, the shepherd in Jesus' parable went after that one sheep. Because again, it is important that not one be lost. That all are brought home.

I love this picture, on the cover of your bulletins, of the Shepherd going out of his way to save the lost sheep. I find it makes a very powerful statement. Especially when the image that often comes to mind is a sheep simply stuck in bush. Or maybe it's the image of the shepherd having already rescued the sheep or the lamb, and he's carrying it back to the herd on his shoulders. All is good and well and there's no big deal.

In this picture though, you see the shepherd hasn't just found the sheep in an easy to fix scenario. No, this sheep has gone and gotten itself in such a predicament, if the shepherd doesn't come to the rescue, it's going to perish. The sheep has somehow gotten perilously stuck on the cliff side. As if the potential of falling to its death wasn't enough, the sheep is also in danger from the large birds of prey you can see swooping in ready to pluck it up and make a nice meal out of it.



The shepherd is taking some pretty big risks to rescue this one little sheep. If there's a path at all on this mountainside, it's not very wide. What's more likely is this shepherd has had to climb out onto some questionable ledges. He's holding on to the rock with one hand and stretching out as far as he can with the other in order to reach that sheep in time. This one little sheep is so important to the shepherd he puts his life on the line to bring it back unharmed.

It reminds me of a hike I took with a friend the first summer I was here in the Portland area. We went to Oneonta Gorge and walked all the way back past Triple Falls. It was gorgeous. On the way back however, there's this spot on the trail with a suspension bridge looking out onto Upper Oneonta Falls (I think). As we approached the bridge, we noticed some commotion. Someone had gone to the other side of the bridge and walked off the trail onto what looked like a sturdy ledge along the cliffside. He was trying to retrieve something he'd lost. Well, the ground gave out from under him and after tumbling into the ravine he was taken downstream about one hundred feet or so before he managed to grab onto something and pull himself out of the water.

End of the story is he managed to use a fallen limb to precariously climb out of the ravine to safety, where several good Samaritans were waiting to help him. We got him safe and somewhat dry. Then we convinced him he did indeed need to see the paramedics as his arm was visibly and badly injured.

Now, I don't know what he was going out on that ledge for, but whatever it was, he felt it was worth the potential of falling a good 40 to 50 feet, or more, down into a ravine with no certainty of coming out alive. He was lucky.

In this picture, where the shepherd is in a very similar situation, we know what he's going after. We can see the sheep in danger. We know that this is an illustration of God's love for us. We know what God is going after on that mountainside. God is going after the lost. Only with God, we know the shepherd goes on this same search for so many, working to bring them back home into a life of grace illumined by love. God even gave God's son to bring us back from the brink sin and death had brought us to as a people. In our ways of understanding the theology captured in this illustration, we see God giving God's self to insure our salvation.

The other piece of this scripture is in the comparison of the importance of the lost and the righteous. On one end there are 99 righteous persons. If we had 99 righteous persons in the sanctuary it would be overflowing. They'd be out in the Narthex and going out the door and possibly into the Peace Garden. Of course, we'd also be praising God there were that many people being fed by Spirit in the ministries of our church. It would mean the love flowing from this church is going out in profound power-filled gospel-action, inspiring the community to be a part of the transformation God brings.

The thing is, to reference another lesson from scripture, the 99 don't need a doctor. The 99 need to follow the example of the shepherd. Jesus, in this parable, left the 99 to go after the one.

Think about that. Put yourself in the place of the lost sheep or in the place of the lost coin. Put yourself in that place and realize this: You are so important to God, that God will search tirelessly to find you and bring you home. You are so important to God, that God will come solely looking for you. You are treasured in the eyes of God and treasured in the eyes of Christ. That's how important you are.

There is so much else out there to distract from the search. There are so many other people out there saying so many different things. Yet, God stays focused and comes looking for you. God

come to rescue you, to nourish you, to bring you home. God comes to love you, to cherish you, to hold you in God's good grace. Our God is a God of mercy and of love.

There's another part to this. You see, Jesus wasn't telling this parable to crowds of lost souls searching for knowledge and truth. He wasn't speaking to the disciples or to the "unclean." Jesus was telling this parable to the pharisees.

If we back up a little bit, we see this lesson in scripture comes right after Jesus had been invited to, and present at, a wedding banquet. That lesson took place surrounded by the well-to-do of Judah, those folks who were seen by the law as acting proper and living in righteousness. It was here where Jesus observed people going straight for the more important seats at the table, taking a chance that they might be humiliated if they're asked to take a lower seat because someone more important arrives. 'Don't sit in the high places. Rather, sit in the low place, that you may be honored,' is what Jesus told them. That passage was about humility, and it was a very different setting then where this morning's parables are being told.

This morning's passage is in a setting with characters like tax collectors, sinners, and all manner of folk the "righteous" didn't want to associate with. They were all coming to listen to what Jesus had to say and Jesus was not telling them to go away. Jesus wasn't telling them to repent before they came to him. Jesus was welcoming them in. Jesus was even eating with them, talking with them, being social with them in an intimate space. He was actually breathing the same air as sinners.

So, of course, the pharisees started to murmur. It was the same kind of murmuring the people had against Moses in the wilderness. In Moses' case, the people started to murmur because they didn't have enough to eat and so they thought Moses had brought them out into the desert to die. It was a similar tone of murmuring amongst the pharisees. "How dare Jesus sit and eat and socialize with sinners and tax collectors and the unclean. What is this, a free-for-all?" Jesus heard their murmurs and tells them this morning's parables.

What that means is this parable is teaching two truths. There's the first part, which we are so familiar with. It's the part we love to hear... God loves you so much. God is going to come and search for you and won't give up till God finds you and pulls you out of danger.

The second part is meant for the pharisees. Jesus isn't telling the pharisees that God's coming in a search and rescue effort to bring *them* home. In this parable, the pharisees are the 99 righteous sheep. Jesus is bringing God's truth home for them in a hard lesson. He's saying, "You know the law. You know the scripture. You've heard the words of Micah saying, "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." You know all of this."

What Jesus is saying is, "You are the 99 who are righteous. These whom I sit with and break bread with now are the ones who are lost. You who know goodness, who know the law, who know what is right need to follow me. You need to allow the celebration to take place, because I tell you truthfully, there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who comes and repents than there is over 99 righteous persons."

I don't know about you... but I have a pretty good idea cause you're sitting here in church, enjoying worship, listening to the word being preached... but I want to be in that celebration. I want to be joining in the rejoicing. I don't wanna be back hiding behind the pulpit with the pharisees murmuring about how I don't wanna feed the hungry or clothe the poor cause they're dirty and sinful.

No, as the 99 righteous... Let's lose the pharisee talk. We're not pharisees.

As those who are here celebrating the word, and the love, and the mercy of God, we are called to be opened to that celebration. We are called to allow that celebration to happen. Heck we're called to send out invitations to that celebration. We are called to not hide behind a pulpit, behind a book, an altar, or a communion table. We are called to go out and open that door, following the example of the shepherd to go after the lost, bring them in, and celebrate with them; to bring them in and rejoice with the angels in heaven. For God loves us so. *All of us.*

That is the message for today. God loves us enough to chase after us. God loves us enough to search for us. God loves us enough to find us and bring us back. But God doesn't *just* love us. God loves *everyone* out there. For God *is* love, God *is* mercy, God *is* hope, and we want to welcome everyone who is found into this hope. Just like the prodigal coming home, "This is my son. This is my daughter. They were lost, but now they're found."

Praise be to God. We were lost, but now we're found. Let us get together a big ol' search party and bring home all the lost we can reach, rejoicing with them.

In Jesus' name. Amen.