

## **A Meditation for Sep 11/22, ‘Proper 19’ – pg. 1**

*By the Rev. Warren Ball of Mt. Albert United Church*

Luke’s gospel is going to paint two very different pictures for us in this time, two pictures of how God is always calling for us. Can you hear God calling, even now? Come, let us prepare for that voice as we open our hearts, minds, and spirits in prayer:

**We turn to you now, dear God, with joy that, instead of giving up on us for lost, as we often do ourselves, you spare no effort to bring us back to the fold. Show us our true natures now! Then help us to live as you would have us live. Amen.**

⇒ Hymn suggestion: VU235 ‘O Worship the King’

Today’s Scripture reading: *from* Luke 15:1-10 ‘The parables of the lost sheep and coin’

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus, while the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled: “Look, this man welcomes sinners, and even eats with them!” So, Jesus told them this parable.

“Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, 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.

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

*May God bless this reading to our understanding!*

### **Sermon: ‘Our Why and God’s How’**

*Lead us now, Good Shepherd – help us to find what’s lost, but also help us to lose all that keeps us from your world of possibility! For the sake of your love this we pray, amen.*

Today, the lectionary brings us two different stories about things that become lost: a sheep becomes lost, then a coin becomes lost. You know, when I was a youngster, I used to get really upset about that story of the lost sheep! I mean, why would the shepherd risk the whole flock for the sake of one critter that went astray? It made me think of that Darwinian business about the survival of the fittest – doesn’t that lost sheep deserve to get eaten by a wolf, so that its ‘stupid’ genes get weeded out of the flock? Remember Spock from the Star Trek shows and movies? Well, he used to say, “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one!” Doesn’t that just make common sense, that no one person should ever

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count more than a whole group? And what about that business to do with more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine people who keep on living righteous lives each and every day? How are we supposed to feel about that? Is it fair? Why should we bother being good, and doing good things, if only bad people have their good deeds celebrated in heaven?

Well, here's the thing for us today: God is God, and that means that God is not human. Which is to say that God is not limited to, or by, the ways that we are limited. No, God can search for the one **and** take care of the ninety-nine at the very same time! Heaven can rejoice at the repentant, but WE can still experience great joy here on earth by living righteously! And we have to recognize that that's the way of parables – they take our conventional understandings, and turn those understandings inside-out and upside-down. So, I've come to learn, the topsy-turvy world of parables is not meant to upset, or confuse, us. Oh, no; parables are about inviting us into whole new worlds of 'possibility-thinking.'

Possibility-thinking ... well, I thought it might be helpful, perhaps even fun, to unwrap today's gospel lesson using some of the Doctrines of our Christian tradition. For example, let's think for a while about today's text in the light of the Doctrine of Reconciliation. This doctrine, just as its name implies, is all about how, in the grace of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ, we can know (we can know!) that God has already been reconciled with us. Now that may seem to be very much akin to the Doctrine of Atonement, because it seems to end up in the same place, but it's not! The Doctrine of Atonement comes out of ancient practices where it was felt that, if something precious was sacrificed to God (or the gods), then that sacrifice could twist God's metaphorical arm to do what we would like to have done. We might like to have good weather; we might like to have a bountiful harvest; we might like to have our sins forgiven. Regardless, according to the idea of atonement, all we have to do is have an innocent animal sacrificed. But think about this! What a crude, naive notion that is, as if we could 'buy' things like forgiveness or success, as if a short-cut could ever create good relationship, or peace, or profound satisfaction. Meanwhile, the Doctrine of Reconciliation simply says that, if we genuinely seek God's love, then we can find it, no matter who we are, and no matter what we've done!

So, if the Doctrine of Reconciliation is very different from the Doctrine of Atonement, here's something else about it that's very important. It also says that, because we have already been accepted by God, we can become reconciled with life itself. When the shepherd in today's text finds his lost sheep, and when the woman in today's text finds her lost coin, they are reconciled not only to what they've lost, but also to their very own lives. And, reconciled to life, we can know God's joy, God's excitement, God's purpose, even if those qualities are far from where we may be!

Now I'd like think with you about a doctrine called the Doctrine of God's Attributes. This doctrine assures us that God is steadfast in purpose, and faithful in character. And that means that whenever we're confused, or tired, or frightened, then let us be assured that God

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is not! More to the point, through relationship, God will share something of heaven's divine, consistent, dependable strength with us. In today's parables, that which was missing was searched for until it was found. Well, we can never move beyond the reach of God's love – hallelujah! Now, it will always be up to us as to whether we open our lives to it but, regardless, God's love is still there, and we can count on it!

Now I want to think with you about today's parables and the Doctrine of the Trinity. In more traditional language, the Trinity is known as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. But to use more modern, inclusive language – that is to say, language that isn't as likely to alienate! – the Trinity is God our Creator, God our Redeemer, and God our Sustainer. Okay, so that stuff may seem to be about God, but the fullness of the Doctrine of the Trinity also touches you and I because it also says that each and every one of us is invited into the community that is God. The fancy Greek word for that is 'perichoresis,' and that word is about the mutually indwelling nature of God. God the creator is one with God the redeemer, even as God the redeemer is one with God the sustainer, and even as all three natures of God are always one integrated being. Every single day, that fancy word can make a huge difference to us because, through relationship with God, we can also become so interconnected with God, and others, that all our differences no longer carry division, and all of our individual ways won't lead to conflict. We can have variety, and a common mission, even if we sometimes lose things!

Let me turn to one last doctrine, the Doctrine of Christian Hope. This one, of all the various Christian doctrines, is my personal favourite! It says that, behind all the biblical stories of being lost, behind all the stories of losing direction and losing hope, behind all the ways that we lose a sense of meaning, behind all the stories of fear, and pain, and suffering, we can glimpse something else. We can glimpse God's yearning for the time that will yet be, a time that is rich and full, a time that, like God, has no end, but that can actually backwash over us now from that perfect future. The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin infer a time when the sheepfold is complete, and the purse is full. A time when we're never threatened, and our resources are always more than enough. That time yet to be can be, in some measure, be ours now!

God loves us so much that those who are 'lost' never have to be. God loves us so much that we can know something of Heaven right here in the midst of all that is certainly not heavenly. God loves us so much that God's seeking has become part of our finding, and our seeking can become part of God's finding! And that's something of how our 'why's' – so often such huge stumbling blocks for us! – can melt and find their perfect resolutions in God's 'how.'

Amen? Oh, yes; amen!

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Come, let us turn back to God now in prayer; come, let us pray:

Loving God, so often we yearn to be found, but found on our own terms. So, take from us, we pray, the fear that, if we give in to your love, we will have less. Rather, show us how those who would, in selfishness, save their lives will lose them, while those who give their lives to the service of your love will truly come to own them!

God, we pray for the touch of your grace now! Inspire us through your self-giving that we may be strengthened to work against injustice, strengthened to make no peace with oppression. Then gird us, God, with discipline that we may become partners with you in shaping the future, a time where no one is left behind, no one goes without, and no one gets pushed to the margins of life.

We pray, O God, for all the places of trouble in this world; we pray for all the people who are facing difficulty. We pray for our family and friends; we pray for the health and well-being of the world's churches ... and, in the silence of the next moments, O God, hear, we pray, the deep concerns that we bear this day: *moment of silence*.

All of this, God, we offer to you now as we take the words that Jesus once taught us, and sing together the choral version of Christ's Prayer at VU959:

**Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your name.**

**Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial**

**and deliver us from evil,**

**for the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and for ever.**

⇒ Hymn suggestion: VU288 'Great Is Thy Faithfulness'

Having been 'found,' go now and become a 'finder!' In the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the constant company of the Spirit, amen.