

SERMON TITLE: “Lost and Found”

TEXT: Luke 15:1-10

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

DATE: August 7, 2011/8th Sunday After Pentecost

Good morning. It is good to be with you this morning.

Thank you for the warm welcome our family has received since we arrived. We very much appreciate the gifts and notes and calls of encouragement over the last month. We have enjoyed this past month of rest and renewal very much, but I am also glad to get started here as well.

A few weeks ago, Kevin emailed and asked what I would be preaching on for August. The question kind of caught me off guard—I guess I was still in holiday mode ☺.

I responded that I would like to use the Conference materials. I thought it would be good to learn and participate with the rhythm and life of the church as it already has going.

But as this Sunday approached, and I began to look more closely at the chosen passage from Luke, and the theme of searching for the lost, I began to scratch my head a bit and wonder how this was going to work

First Sundays and first sermons are kind of symbolically significant occasions, after all.

Shouldn't I be preaching about new beginnings or something more relevant to what this Sunday was going to look like? Maybe a text about Joshua looking out at the promised land, or one of Peter's rousing sermons to the early church in book of Acts, or one of Paul's letters might have been more appropriate!

The parables we just heard read didn't seem like an obvious fit.

How do we locate this new beginning—for me and for our family, and for Lethbridge Mennonite Church—in a story about lost sheep and coins?

But the more time I spent in the text over the course of the week, it began to seem more and more appropriate for my first sermon here and for what I see the nature and the task of the church to be, whether the global church of followers of Jesus around the world, or this community of faith here in Lethbridge.

There are themes in these two short parables that the church can never hear too often, themes that I hope will come out this morning.

Before we begin, a word about sermons.

As I'm sure you are aware, there is no shortage of understandings out there of what a sermon is or should be out there.

Some think they should be long, some think they should be short. Some think they should be primarily about explaining what the Bible means (information), some think they should be mainly a moral exhortation (telling us what to do). Some think they should be topical, some think they should stick close to the text of Scripture. Some think they should incorporate various forms of media, others disagree, etc.

I have my own views about each of these, and these will probably become clear over time.

But fundamentally, my conviction is that a sermon should do at least three things.

1. A sermon should tell us the truth about God
2. A sermon should tell us the truth about us.
3. A sermon should point toward (not dictate or determine) a response on our behalf.

This is what we see over and over again in Jesus' teaching and ministry.

Jesus reorients his hearer's conception of God, he often challenges them to reconsider some of their own self-conceptions, and he invited a response in how people lived.

So. Back to the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

TWO CHALLENGES

There is a risk that comes with Jesus' parables—especially for those of us who may have heard them many times. The risk is that we can become *too* familiar with Jesus' words—perhaps even to the point where we are not as open to hearing something new from an old story as we might be.

I had to work against this temptation this week. Because on one level, the parables are fairly straightforward:

We have a lost sheep and a lost coin, and the joy that comes with finding them. The point is clear: God rejoices when sinful human beings repent and come home. Nice and easy, right?

We have a vivid picture of God's love for people and good motivation for searching for the lost.

But Jesus' parables were almost always crafted with a bit of a twist, to convict those who thought they had things figured out and to give a word of hope to those who had none.

There was almost always a word to both outsiders and insiders, and I think today's Scripture is no exception.

1. A Word to/about Outsiders.

Some of you know that I am a blogger, which basically means that I have a website where I write about things and engage in conversation with people, most often related to where and how I see the story of God in the stories all around us.

So, in that vein, perhaps an analogy from the world of the broader culture will help us here—an area where I see the Christian story at work in :

Some of you may be familiar with the Harry Potter series of books by J.K. Rowling. Our children have grown to love these stories over the last few years, as have Naomi and I.

One of the many interesting themes that come out of these books is the question of boundaries and belonging—the question of who is in and who is out.

In the magical world of Hogwarts School, there are some students whose parents have “pure” magical blood, while others are “mud-bloods” or “Muggle-borns” (Muggles are regular people who can't do magic).

The villain in these stories is Voldemort, and one of his main objectives is to rid Hogwarts of the mudbloods, so that only those who are pure remain.

There are three child heroes in the film, and, interestingly, none of them are “pure” in the normal sense. Harry Potter is a “half-blood,” Hermione Granger is “muggle-born,” and Ronald Weasley is from a family of pure bloods that nonetheless see muggles as equals.

One of the major themes of Rowling's tale of good vs. evil is the conquest of “racial hatred” and superiority by self-sacrificing love and mutual acceptance and cooperation.

Many of those in Israel during Jesus' day—specifically, the religious leaders—would have seen their ethnicity in similar ways to the antagonists in the Harry Potter stories. They were pure, and others were not.

They were the sheep of God's pasture (e.g., Psalm 79:13).

For the Pharisees, to eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners was especially offensive because food laws separated the properly observant from sinners. Tax collectors were doubly guilty because they not only were often seen as dishonest, but they were collecting taxes from Israel's hated Roman oppressors.

Jesus' insistence on eating with the "unclean" made the religious leaders angry for this reason.

The point of the parable on this level is clear enough: Jesus is challenging the scribes and Pharisees on their conception of who was or was not appropriate table company—who was or was not the object of God's saving interest.

Jesus was challenging their assumptions of who is allowed into the sheep pen.

He is taking a category of people that many would have written off as unworthy or impure, and outside the scope of God's redemptive work, and locating them within the same "pen" as those who thought they were privileged by virtue of their religious and ethnic identity.

Of course, this made people angry, but for those who were used to being seen as outsiders, this was incredibly good news!

They were the objects of God's attention, too. God was seeking them out.

2. A word to/about insiders

But Jesus goes beyond simply telling insiders that outsiders were God's sheep as well. I think these parables hint at a word to those *inside* the pen as well.

Why? Well, I think a clue might lie in Luke 15:7. Jesus says this, about the shepherd who has found the lost sheep:

I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

I don't know about you, but I hear a bit of sarcasm here... One commentator I read this week (N.T. Wright) suggested that we read this verse out loud with a smile on their face and a question mark at the end. Something like this:

*... there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons **who do not need to repent??***

Who, exactly, would fit into this category?

The Apostle Paul echoes a theme found throughout Scripture in Romans 3:10-11 (quoting Psalm 53), when he says “there is no one righteous, no one who understands, no one who seeks God.”

The Pharisees perhaps *thought* they had no need of repentance, but I suspect they would have caught Jesus’ irony in this parable.

Because, of course, there is no such thing as someone who doesn’t need to repent.

And there is more than one way to be lost.

When we read the parable, we see the words “repent” and “repentance.” The Greek word for this is *metanoia* and it’s worth unpacking this word a bit.

We sometimes think that to “repent” means to apologize for what we’ve done, sorry for our sins, etc. This is certainly part of what repentance is, but *metanoia* is a much more comprehensive term.

It means to **reorient** oneself, to **start again**, to **turn around** and start out in another direction.

Metanoia is a “whole life” word that has to do with the direction we are facing, the road we are walking on, the one we are oriented towards. It’s not just a prayer or a bunch of words that we say that are our ticket into the pen.

I think Jesus wanted the Pharisees to see themselves in this word. He wanted to say, “turn around! You think you’re aligning yourself with God and his purposes, but you’ve wandered off the path! You, too, are lost. You, too, are the sheep that I am seeking to bring back!”

This is good news for insiders—even if they (or we!) may not see it as such initially!

And so this parable, in all of its dimensions, is very appropriate at the outset of this new chapter in our lives as a family and in the life of Lethbridge Mennonite Church.

The good news of this passage—the good news that the church is called to proclaim—is that the God we worship is a God who seeks and who finds us, however we are lost, and in whatever ways we need to be found.

The church is to be a place where we are participating with God in seeking out the lost sheep, looking for the lost coin.

Perhaps our religious and cultural climate makes us a bit uneasy with the word “evangelism.” Maybe we tend to think of overbearing and insensitive forms of proselytizing that grab so many headlines, and we want nothing to do with this.

But I think we need to remember that we *do* have good news to share with others, **in word and deed**.

I think that you already know and live this, as a church. I have heard evidence of the ways in which this church extends a welcome to the outsider, ways in which you seek to spread the grace and peace of God to all, regardless of ethnicity, social status, etc.

We need to continue to look for ways to search out the tax-collectors and sinners in our community.

But the church is also to be a place where we are always acknowledging **our own** “lostness.”

I should be clear: I am not suggesting that we ought to always be agonizing about whether or not we belong to Jesus or not. God does not want us to live in a constant state of anxiety over the status of our salvation.

But I think Jesus’ consistent message to the Pharisees and religious leaders of Israel ought to give us pause.

The Pharisees quite clearly thought of themselves as “insiders.” They would have probably thought of themselves as one of the 99 sheep safely in the pen, yet in Matthew 23, Jesus referred to them as “blind guides,” “whitewashed tombs”—and worse.

He told them to repent.

Repentance means *continually* examining and reorienting ourselves according to the pattern of Jesus.

I don’t know about you, but I find myself doing this often!

The parable makes it very clear that there is a party in heaven when we make that **initial** decision to follow Jesus.

But I think there is also joy in God’s heart when we make *daily* decisions—in the office, in the classroom, with our kids or our parents, and all of the other routines of daily life—to follow Jesus, to love God and our neighbours.

Sometimes getting ourselves properly on the path will require a pretty radical turn; sometimes it will be a slight adjustment to get us back on course.

Whatever it may look like in each individual case , we are always to live *metanoia* lives, where we are always turning to face Christ on the path.

This is what brings God joy.

And this is part of what draws other people who are, perhaps, lost in different ways than we are, into God's family.

I'm going to close with the words from a song we sang here last Sunday.

This is the second verse of "Nothing is lost on the Breath of God," written by Colin Gibson, from *Sing the Story*:

Nothing is lost to the eyes of God,
nothing is lost forever.
God sees with love, and that love will remain,
holding the world forever.

No journey too far, no distance too great,
no valley of darkness too blinding;
No creature too humble, no child too small
for God to be seeking and finding.

This is the truth of the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. In whatever ways we and those around us, in this community, in our city, province, country, and world are lost, **our God is a seeking God and a finding God.**

And God uses us in his project.

This is the truth about God and the truth about us.

Thanks be to God.