

### A Shepherd??!! A Woman??!!

It is very clear that the two parables form the heart of the portion of Luke's gospel appointed for this morning. What were the circumstances that gave rise to these parables? Apparently, Jesus made a habit of hanging out with the nobodies of the town, which annoyed the prominent folks to no end. So much so, that the members of local clergy and bar associations, the somebodies, complained about the company that Jesus was keeping. "This fellow welcomes those people, the low lifes; he actually eats with them."

So Jesus responded by telling 3 stories about searching for lost treasures; a sheep, a coin, and two sons. All of us know something about what it is like to search high and low for something we have lost, whether it be keys or a book, a cell phone, a credit card. And we know something about the relief and joy that washes over us when we find whatever it is that we have misplaced and we can go on with our day.

Speaking for myself alone, I've usually only shared the joy of finding with my beloved other half. I'm mostly too embarrassed at losing my keys, yet again, to throw a party when I finally find them.

I want to suggest that the point, the intent, of these two stories is to proclaim the great news of our compassionate and searching God. Jesus proclaims that great new by saying, "God is like a shepherd, or a woman."

Take a look at the sermon title and all the punctuation marks, Today, those exclamation points and question marks only sort of convey the sense of shock and outrage these images would have created in the important folk, the somebodies who were listening to Jesus. Talk about low life - men could not sink much lower than shepherds in that time. In our time, men sleeping on heating grates or under bridges receive more respect than the shepherds of Jesus' time.

And women. As much as an individual man might come to respect and cherish his woman, she still was property. Women in general? Not worth considering.

We can only imagine how ripples of protest or joy might have gone through the crowd listening to Jesus as he talked.

Did an ancient equivalent of “booooo” run through the folks who were gathered on the shady side of the street as they realized that Jesus was really saying “God is like a shepherd. A shepherd who risks everything by searching for one lost sheep. Furthermore, God is ecstatic whenever the lost are found!”

Did cheers ring out from the ordinary folk who were sweating it out in the hot Palestinian sun? Did those cheers drown out the jeers, when he went on to say, “God is like a woman. A woman who will tear the house apart to find a lost coin. Not only that. She will spend far more than the coin is worth on the celebration party after she recovers the coin.” God is ecstatic whenever the lost are found.

If the “good” folks were complaining because Jesus hung out with tax collectors and sinners, by the time these parables were complete, those important folk really had something to complain about!! Who did that fellow think he was - saying that God was like a shepherd, or worse yet a woman!

Twenty one centuries later how might we take these parables of the lost treasures and the compassionate searching God?

Remember the audience - the somebodies, standing in the shade; the nobodies, sweltering and sweating in the hot sun. The good folks and the bad folks? eh - only maybe. Or from another parable, the sheep and the goats. It seems to me they were folks just like us -or maybe we are folks just like them. We all have days when we are somebodies and days when we are nobodies, even to the one who meets us in the mirror.

The company president goes home from work, stops by the supermarket, gets a loaf of bread and stands in the checkout line behind

the one who finally managed to collect and redeem enough cans to be able to buy a loaf of bread.

Yes, there are vast inequalities among us - the most obvious being the difference in the lives of those who have too much and those who lack the basic necessities for even a simple life.

And yes, among the poor and the wealthy we will find those fruits of the Spirit - love, peace, patience, joy, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, honor, courage, greatness of mind and nobility of spirit.

Likewise, among those who have and those who have not, we will find anger, deceitfulness, viciousness, apathy, thievery, callousness, cheating, cowardice, hypocrisy, narrowness of mind and smallness of spirit.

But neither the sheep nor the coin can sin. To ask, "where is the sin?" is to ask the wrong question of these stories. rpt

Remember, Jesus told these stories of the lost treasures so that the people of his time and the people of our time might see something more of the kindness and compassion of the searching God who is ecstatic any time, the lost are found. Which is to say that God is ecstatic every time we learn to love more generously and compassionately - every time a sinner repents. That's what it means for a sinner to repent you know - learning to love in ways and places we have never loved before.

We all have ways and places we can learn to love.

It is a more compassionate and hopeful, a more loving thing to advocate for rehabilitation than retribution in our prison systems, for example.

It is a more loving thing to advocate for a living minimum wage, than to have lower wage folks having to work 2 ½ jobs just to reach the poverty income level.

It is a more loving thing to advocate for justice anywhere, than to sit on our hands, keep our mouths shut, and think, "not my problem."

We all have ways and places where we must learn to love.

Jesus told these stories that they, and we, might see something more of the joy of our God. Jesus told these stories so that in seeing the joy of God we might relax, trust God, and love one another.

How are we to take these words of scripture into our lives and living. Remember: God just gets tickled pink every time we relax, trust God and love like we've never loved before. So this week, let us make God happy, very, very happy indeed.

Amen