

September 11, 2022
14th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 24 (C)
Text: Luke 15:1-10

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I read a story this week about a woman who went hiking in a forest preserve on Maui and ended up getting lost. An official rescue team was dispatched to look for her, but after 72 hours and finding no trace of her, the official search was called off. However, there was a large group of volunteers who kept searching. They climbed up and down ravines. They searched caves and ponds. They even rented a helicopter to expand the search area. And finally, two weeks after the official search party was called off, the volunteers found the woman. She was exhausted and dehydrated, and had broken a leg, but she was alive.

It makes me wonder whether the most important word in Jesus' two parables might be "until." The shepherd kept searching for his lost sheep until he found it. The woman turned her house upside down, sweeping and searching until she found the coin that was lost. Jesus wants to give us a picture of God's persistent compassion. Like the volunteer search party in Maui, God doesn't give up on anyone. For God, it's not enough to have the 99 sheep who never went wandering, or the nine coins that didn't disappear. God values each and every sheep, each and every coin. None are dispensable.

And, of course, it isn't really sheep or coins that Jesus is speaking about. It's human beings. The religious authorities were critical of Jesus because he associated with tax collectors and sinners—those who were looked down on because they didn't obey all the religious purity rules, or because they collaborated with the Roman occupation government. People like that were rejected and shunned. They had no place in respectable society. But Jesus shared meals with "those people," a sign that he recognized them as fellow children of God, that he hadn't written them off for religious or political reasons. Jesus was convinced that every person is loved by God their creator. No human being is disposable. No human being is trash. And just like the shepherd who searches until he finds the lost sheep, and just like the woman who searches until she finds the lost coin, God doesn't give up on those who are lost.

I wonder whether you have personally felt the profound, life-giving power of Jesus' message that God's love is not limited to the (quote-unquote) good people, that God's expansive embrace has room for you, no matter what. You don't have to be like the 99 sheep who stayed with the flock. God's love claims us and every wandering sheep. God does not hold our flaws and failures against us. There is such joy in knowing that God's favor and forgiveness can never be earned by our efforts, but only received as a gift. There is such peace in being set free from condemnation, and free from any demand to achieve perfection. Jesus reaches out to us with compassion and generosity, and his touch makes our hearts whole.

These stories are so tremendously comforting. They are all about undeserved grace and God's commitment to love us, no matter what. How reassuring is it to know that God will never give up on you? But as I've been thinking about these stories this week, it occurs to me that there is a very challenging flip side to these comforting stories. I believe that Jesus tells them expecting to challenge and change how we see each other, how we treat each other, and how we relate to every neighbor. Jesus wants us to know how deeply we are loved, and to know that God loves every one of God's children just like that. God will never give up on anyone. And Jesus wants that same love to inform all our relationships and all our interactions.

Now, it's relatively easy for me to love a generic neighbor in the abstract. But it's a lot harder to love the drug addicted homeless people who leave their trash and drug paraphernalia strewn all around the church grounds, where I have to put on latex gloves and pick it all up on a Sunday morning. And it's a lot harder to love the politicians and their supporters who are all about white supremacy and hating gay and trans people, and who are threatening our democracy by spreading lies. And it's a lot harder to love the driver who almost caused an accident by pulling right in front of me so I had to slam on my brakes. I imagine you probably have your own list of neighbors who are difficult to love because they are a source of fear or worry or sadness or resentment or anger. I do believe, though, that Jesus not only wants us to know that God loves all of those inconvenient neighbors and will not give up on them. I believe that Jesus also wants us to see those neighbors with his compassionate and generous vision.

And that leads me to wonder about the way Jesus ends each of his stories: there will be such great joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. In English, the word "repent" has acquired connotations of "sorrow and grief for moral failures." And we imagine someone who has been so lost, they've completely blown up their life and they've hit bottom. With deep regret for everything they've done, they turn to Jesus for forgiveness. And it seems that, for most of us, that ends up turning repentance into something like a spectator sport. I mean, we may go through a rough patch now and then, but our lives aren't completely out of control. And there may be something we regret in our past, but most of us are probably not actively blowing up our lives right now. So repentance is, for the most part, something other people need to do. But the Greek word that Luke uses doesn't carry those connotations. *Metanoia* means to change your mind or change your course in life, and I believe God is calling for metanoia, for a turnaround, in us, so that we can see all our neighbors with Jesus' compassionate and generous vision. I wonder what attitudes or habits or feelings get in the way of seeing others with Jesus' compassionate and generous vision.

And all of a sudden, I can recognize any number of obstacles to embracing the way Jesus lived with an open and generous heart.

- Fear is a big obstacle. When I'm afraid of what the economy might do, or afraid of what the political extremists might do, or afraid of what the homeless campers might do—fear can get a foothold in my heart, but nothing good ever comes out of that. Fear makes me tighten up inside and takes away my creativity and kindness.
- Comparing myself or my situation to others—that's another dead end, as is judging and evaluating others. And resentment—that's a dead end too, and it paralyzes our compassion. Those kinds of habits and attitudes really don't give life or blessing in any way at all.
- Sometimes my convenience or my schedule or just how I want things to be can get in the way of being able to even see the needs or concerns of others, let alone give them my consideration.

I wonder if you've experienced any of those obstacles.

Thankfully, Jesus never gives up on us, and Jesus is all about healing and transformation, about changing our hearts and minds with the power of love. And I believe that's what being found is finally all about—being found by love, so that love changes us. Being found is to know that love is stronger than our fears or insecurities, love is stronger than our resentment or judgment, and love is what makes life full. Being found is experiencing the truth that God's love is stronger than any of the changes and challenges that unsettle us. Being found is becoming so rooted in God's love that our hearts are opened to see others and treat others with compassion and generosity. Being found is definitely a life-long process. We continually need to have our minds and attitudes changed by Jesus' wisdom and Jesus' way of forgiveness and humility. But thanks be God, Jesus will search for us until he finds us. Amen.