**Simple Questions, Complex Answers & the Messiness of Faith**

14th Sunday after Pentecost, 11 September 2022

*Alternate Gospel translation provided by The Rev. Dr. Mark G Vitalis Hoffman, United Lutheran Seminary*

Luke 15.1-10 (mgvh)

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were crowding around Jesus to listen to him.

2 And the Pharisees along with the experts in the Torah Law were grumbling, saying,

“This guy, he welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

3 So [Jesus] told them this parable, saying,

4“What person among you, if he has one hundred sheep and loses from among them even one…

He leaves the ninety-nine in the open country

and goes after the one that was lost until he finds it, doesn’t he?

5 And when he finds it, he puts it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

6 And when he gets home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them,

‘Rejoice with me, because I found my lost sheep!’

7 Let me tell you, in the same way,

there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who is repenting

than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.

8 Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins, if she loses one coin…

She surely lights a lamp and sweeps the house

and keeps on searching carefully until she finds it, doesn’t she?

9 And when she finds it, she calls together her girlfriends and neighbors, saying,

‘Rejoice with me, because I found the coin that was lost.’

10 In the same way, let me tell you,

joy happens in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who is repenting.”

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Across the Gospels we read around 50 parables, but many are repeats that show up in two or more of the Gospels. Most folks total around 30 unique parables of Jesus. On Sundays between today and Reformation Day, we will hear at least six parables of Jesus, that’s roughly 20% of them. The parables of Jesus are some of the richest storytelling we have in scripture, even though so many are short stories. But don’t mistake shortness for simplicity. Believers across the world and throughout the ages have encountered these short stories of Jesus and wrestled with what he intended when he said them to his audience. We, as faithful hearers of God’s Word today, join in such endeavor and ponder what Jesus says to us, too.

As we embark on this journey, I invite you to think about these stories and what they might say about God, the world, and you. Hear this: we should have questions when we hear the parables! Nothing would make me happier to be your pastor than to be stumped by an incredible question about Jesus and his parables after today’s sermon.

Which brings me to my own question about these parables of lostness read today:

Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

It necessarily requires a chicken to produce an egg… but chickens come from eggs, but eggs come from chickens…

Well, this age-old question has been explored scientifically, and there is an answer… well, answers. An answer depends on what we mean by “egg” and what we mean by “chicken.” For example, the amniotic egg, the type that birds lay today with multiple membranes which offer everything necessary for life to develop safely within the shell, absolutely came before any type of chicken. The egg came first!

Yet a chicken’s egg is a particular type of amniotic egg. The answer is muddled again. The chicken eggs that we’re used to in our present time likely developed once chickens were domesticated. The chicken came first!

No matter how we approach it, we have a messy, unsatisfying answer to a simple question.

Many have approached these parables of lostness in the same way. When we do that, we also get messy, unsatisfying answers.

Both parables, one about a lost sheep and the other about a lost coin, are told by Jesus in response to a group of grumbling guys who gathered to complain that Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors.

The two parables are remarkably similar. Both concern a person who has lost something—one sheep of the hundred or one coin of the ten. Both parables demonstrate the person then taking effective action to find the lost thing. Both say, in nearly identical wording, “Rejoice with me, for I have found [the coin / my sheep] that was lost.” And both end in similar ways.

Interpreters have and always will wrestle with this text. I make no claim that we’ll settle anything in this time. But I say again that wondering about Jesus’ response to the grumbling is holy work, it is watering, pruning, fertilizing our faith so that it may grow.

And though this work is faithful, it is not without messiness. Jesus says to the grumblers something about the state of being lost. We immediately think of our own sinful state in the world because we equate our sin as separating us from God and losing our righteousness. Is Jesus, then, calling the Pharisees and Experts sinners? Is he calling us sinners?

But we have to wonder: can a sheep and coin really sin? Or is the sin the act of losing, not being lost. For it’s the shepherd who fails to care for the sheep and the woman fails to care for the coin. Both end up losing the thing that has been entrusted to them.

Aha! We’ve solved it. Jesus is telling those grumbling guys that they are sinners because they have not cared for the people their supposed to care for!

Of course, you know it’s more complicated than that. There is more to the parable than simply the characters losing something. The stories go on; the lost thing is found. Both the Shepherd and the Woman have done what was necessary to bring wholeness back to their world. And, in response to the effort, they celebrate, and it is a joyous celebration!

So, is Jesus telling the Pharisees and Experts in Torah Law to celebrate? This does not seem to be the case, either…

Well, maybe the focus is on that act of finding the lost thing. Both parables speak of repentance, so maybe this is a story about repentance. Maybe this is like the chicken and the egg. It’s a question of which comes first: Repentance or Forgiveness?

[in dramatic voice] “A sinner who is lost must turn away from sin and be found by God!”

Well, what did the sheep do to repent? What did the coin do to repent? At the very most, the only action both lost things took was simply being found by God. But the shepherd and the woman, they do seem to take actions similar to repentance. To repent means to make a change, to turn from what you’re doing to something new. The shepherd changes from being a loser of sheep to a finder of sheep. In the same way, the woman turns from being a loser of coin to a finder of coin. Both have repented of their losing and turn toward finding.

But again, it is more complex. Throughout history, many, many, many believers have understood the Shepherd and the Woman to be analogies to God. Just as the Shepherd and Woman seek that which is lost, God seeks what is lost. Again, we encounter the amazing messiness of parables. Because we just said that the Shepherd and Woman were sinners who repented, does this mean we’re saying God is in need of repentance? By no means! Like the chicken and the egg, trying to find a nice, satisfying answer to this parable of Jesus is not the point.

Time and again, Jesus speaks in parables because they are complex. They require faith to hear and to explore. They challenge us and make us think. Parables remind us that God is always bigger than we can even fathom. As soon as we think we have the answer we’re reminded that we’re wrong.

So, what is left? Well, we’ve explored all but the last lines of these parables.

Let me tell you, in the same way [as the Shepherd and the Lost Sheep and the Woman and the Lost Coin,]

there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who is repenting than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance. And again, joy happens in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who is repenting.

Jesus does not seem to be saying that we need to figure out the perfect way to repent or consider what sins folks are guilty of. The piece that Jesus focuses on is the joy. The shepherd and the woman gather friends and neighbors and join in vibrant celebration.

In the same way, the Triune God, with the hosts of heaven and all the angels, rejoice again and again and again and again when a sinner repents, when what is lost is found.

We want simple answers to our questions, and instead we get parables. Jesus reminds us that simple answers are not what we need. And he reminds us that we so often ask the wrong questions. We want to focus on being right, but Jesus calls us to focus on faith. There is a grand diversity of what Jesus intends for us and how we respond to God’s Word. Yet all of it is done in faith. So when we hear this parable, we hear it all.

And perhaps that is exactly the good news for us. Through the ministry of Jesus’ witness we see the love of God who cares deeply for us in such a way that God speaks to you, to me, to the world. It is out of love that we can know we are both the loser and the lost, the sinner and the one sinned against.

Because of God we can repent and we can call others to repent. By grace we forgive and are forgiven. Yes, in all these many acts of turning which bring the world closer to God, we are reminded that God is at work in us through Christ Jesus.

Let us hear Jesus words: In the same way, may we join in the joyous celebration of God and rejoice always. And one way we rejoice with God is through growing in faith, and for this we give thanks.

Amen.