

Finding The Lost Pieces Of Our Lives
A Sermon On Luke 15:1-10
Proper 19C – Luke 15:1-10

I remember hearing someone say, “I feel like there are parts of myself that have been lost along the way, and I don’t know if I can go back and find them again.” It was nearly twenty years ago when I heard that and it’s never left me. I knew exactly what he was talking about. I thought about parts of my life that had been lost along the way, recent losses and long ago losses that had never been forgotten.

I suspect you know what that’s like too. You can probably name parts of yourself that have been lost along the way. Some of those lost parts are recent wounds, others are scarred memories. And always the questions – Can we find the lost parts of ourselves? Can we become whole again?

I wonder if that’s what the shepherd and woman in today’s gospel are asking themselves. I wonder if they feel as if they have lost a part of their life – a sheep, a coin. It’s not just a sheep, any sheep, but this sheep, a particular sheep. And it’s not just a coin, any coin, but this coin, a particular coin. It’s not just a part of our life, any part, but this part, a particular part. Without it we are less than whole, and we want ourselves back.

If you know what it’s like to have lost a part of yourself then you know what it’s like to be the shepherd and woman in today’s gospel (Luke 15:1-10). That’s not the usual way this gospel is interpreted. The usual interpretation goes something like this. The lost sheep and lost coin are often taken to be sinners, who have gone astray, done wrong, gotten lost. And the shepherd and woman are often seen as images of a searching God.

But that doesn’t really fit the story. The woman says, “I have found the coin that I had lost.” The shepherd says, “I have found my sheep that was lost.” The woman lost her coin. The shepherd lost his sheep. It’s more about the shepherd and woman than the sheep and coin. Besides, it’s hard to attribute culpability, free will, or a choice to a sheep or coin.

The lost sheep and coin already belonged to the shepherd and woman. The shepherd had one hundred sheep to begin with and the woman had ten coins to begin with. The shepherd lost a part of himself. The woman lost a part of herself. They were whole and complete until something of their life was lost. So I want to take a different approach to today’s gospel from the usual interpretation.

What if we are the shepherd and the woman? And what if the sheep and coins are parts of our life, parts of ourselves? Maybe today’s gospel is not about categorizing ourselves or others as sinners or righteous as the Pharisees and scribes are doing. Maybe this gospel is really about wholeness and losing parts of ourselves, and not who is good or bad, in or out.

Here’s why I say that. Luke says that Jesus “told them this parable.” Told who? Who is “them?”

Is Jesus telling these parables to the tax collectors and sinners who were coming near to listen to

him, or is he telling them to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling about him welcoming sinners and eating with them?

Yes. It is for them, all of them. And it is for us. The difference between the tax collectors and sinners, and the Pharisees and scribes is not that one group is lost and the other is not lost, one group is sinful and the other righteous. The difference is that one group is lost and they know and the other group is lost but they don't know it.

To be lost is something we've all experienced. Sometimes we know we are lost and other times we don't.

When have you lost a part of yourself? What parts of your life are you searching for today? What do you need to have more wholeness? Have you ever said that you need to get your life turned around? Have you ever felt like something was missing? Maybe you knew what it was or maybe you didn't. You just had a restless longing, a sense that there was something missing, something more to your life.

Maybe you knew something was missing in your marriage, your parenting, your reputation, your integrity, your work, and you wanted to turn things around. When have you walked away from a relationship or a part of your life because it was too hard or too scary? Have you ever looked in the mirror and wondered where the joy, enthusiasm, vitality of your life went?

Sometimes we lose parts of ourselves to grief and sorrow, when life becomes overwhelming and confusing, to the pain and wounds of life, to circumstances that are nobody's fault, and sometimes to the choices we've made. Sometimes we lose ourselves to fear, anger, jealousy, wanting to be right more than doing right, judgments we make of others, refusing to forgive. Sometimes we lose ourselves to success, gaining approval, meeting the expectations of others. Sometimes the lost part of ourselves is faith, hope, a dream. It is so easy to lose a piece of ourselves and it can happen in a thousand different ways.

Are you today settling for less than what you really want out of life and your relationships? Are you living less than a whole and complete life? The poet Mary Oliver asks it like this. "Are you breathing just a little, and calling it a life?"

Let's not do that. Let's not settle. Today's gospel is an invitation to wholeness or what we sometimes call salvation. It's not about being 90% or even 99% alive or whole. We are to look at the entirety of our life. Every sheep matters. Every coin matters. This is about wholeness and abundance, not as a quantity but as a quality of life.

The gospel of Jesus is not about making bad people good. It's about bringing people back to life. It's a path by which we find ourselves. It's a call to wholeness. Jesus is always calling us back to ourselves, back to wholeness. Our life's journey is a journey toward wholeness. And it is a life long search to integrate and live a whole life. Where are you on this journey?

We know these stories as the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin. But

that's not completely accurate. They could also be called the Parable of the Found Sheep and the Parable of the Found Coin. That's how both stories end. The shepherd is once again whole. The woman is once again whole. And there is rejoicing. They are not just stories of losing but also of finding. It's both.

Jesus said the shepherd goes after the lost sheep "until he finds it," and the woman "searches carefully" for the coin "until she finds it." Until he finds it, until she finds it. There is a promise and a call in that for us too. The promise is that there will be a finding for us too and the call is to search until we find.

Sometimes it's a call to light a lamp, sweep our house, and search carefully in the very place in which we live and have our relationships, the place that is most known and familiar. And other times the call to wholeness takes us into the wilderness, into the wild and untamed parts of our life.

That kind of searching, searching until we find, is not a searching outside of ourselves but a searching within. It means searching until we value ourselves beyond what we have done and left undone, beyond what we have or don't have, beyond our successes and failures, beyond what is or might have been.

I don't know how or when that finding will happen for you, but I know it does. I've experienced it in my life and I've seen it happen in the lives of others. That finding returns us to ourselves. And yet, I also know that the searching and finding never end. There is a continuing call to become more fully and authentically ourselves.

Before his death, Rabbi Zusya, an eighteenth century Hasidic Jew, said, "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' They will ask me: 'Why were you not Zusya?'"