

Sermon for 14th September 2025, Year C, Pentecost 14

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Sermon

This gospel reading from Luke contains two really well-known parables: about the shepherd who has lost one sheep out of a hundred and goes searching for it until it is found, and the woman who has lost one of her ten silver coins and searches her house thoroughly until she finds it. Jesus suggests that these lost items represent sinners that God is seeking with love, and that when such sinners repent, there is joy in heaven.

We're probably very familiar with this idea of Jesus as a shepherd seeking out the lost, bringing them back into the fold. The parables convey how important such sinners are to God. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep to search for just one sheep, because every sheep is vital to the kingdom and community of God's people. And that one silver coin – almost certainly a drachma – was typically worth the purchase price of, yes, one sheep. For the woman this is easily worth the effort of searching the house from top to bottom, though a sheep would probably have been easier to find than the coin!

Incidentally, this is the only parable in the New Testament where a woman is presented as representing God's longing to welcome everyone into his house. So, Jesus describes God in terms of both male and female imagery, as someone passionately seeking us out with love; we who, like lost sheep and lost coins, are often not able to help ourselves.

So, is that it, then? Simple stories intended to show us how much God loves us, how persistently he will pursue us to bring us home, how valuable and beloved we are to him? If that were the whole story it would still be beautiful, and

perhaps there are many of us here who really need to hear this, not just in words on the page, but deeply experienced in heart and soul, like a poem or fragrance that triggers a powerful memory of recognition.

Do we remember what it was like to be found by God, to be carried home over his shoulders, to be rejoiced over? Or are we here as seekers ourselves, searching for faith, still not convinced that we have indeed ever been found, and perhaps wondering if we have ever been sought at all?...

I wonder if this is how the tax-collectors and sinners were feeling as Jesus spent time with them. The religious leaders and the righteous considered such people unworthy of God's attention, and therefore unworthy of their own attention. If church today makes you feel like that, you're likely in good company.

There's a very powerful cartoon by former church pastor-turned-artist David Haywood – which depicts a flock of sheep safely in their pen while one lone sheep is stuck waiting outside. One of the leaders of the flock comes out to greet the lone sheep and apologises to them that the ninety-nine just need a little more time to come to an agreement on whether to include the outsider. The tragic punchline of the cartoon is that the outsider, the so-called 'lost' sheep, sadly dies before the ninety-nine safe insiders can come to any consensus decision to welcome them in. The larger group of ninety-nine sheep had made the mistake of assuming that the lost sheep was the problem, rather than their own ability to be inclusive. In the original cartoon, the excluded sheep was depicted as a gay sheep and painted in rainbow colours, but the cartoon works with any minority that the Church has tended to exclude or judge.

The twist in Jesus's parable is that he wasn't talking to excluded people – the tax-collectors and sinners; he was preaching to the Pharisees and scribes, the ones who considered themselves included, worthy and righteous. He was talking to the ninety-nine sheep who couldn't care less about the one. For them, the parable is not about being found – they already consider themselves fully

included at the heart of their faith. For them, these parables are about learning to rejoice when others they disapprove of are found and enter the kingdom of God. Both the parables end in the same way, with rejoicing and celebration, and Jesus is telling these grumbling insiders that salvation consists not just of rescuing the outsiders, but also in being drawn into the eternal celebration.

In some ways it's easy and comfortable for the privileged elite to see the point of religion as rescuing those poor lost unrighteous unclean people over there. They are the problem to be fixed, not us! 'Get them in, get them cleaned up, and then we can all share table fellowship together – when they look like us, and like all the same hymns.'

But Jesus is inviting everyone straight into the party, and if the response from the insiders is "we don't party," or "we don't party like that," or "we don't party with *them*," then they will sadly have missed the entire point of their religion.

Whether we are willing to join the celebration is all-important, because it reveals whether our relationships are built on merit or on mercy. Those who hate when God is merciful cannot celebrate with angels when a sinner repents, and they exclude themselves from the party and from God's grace. Jesus may indeed be seeking out the lost, but it is the 'already found' that his parable is intended to bring to repentance.

Let's go back to the very start of the passage. "The tax collectors and sinners were coming near." This is when the threat and the discomfort begins. Imagine perhaps a crowd of homeless people or migrants loudly clamouring at the door. The outsiders are approaching the inner circle, and all the establishment figures are looking at each other awkwardly and saying, 'What do we do now? Why is Jesus preaching about righteousness one second and then embracing this woman or this man, in the next?' Doesn't he know what sort of people they are? How can he share a meal with them?

Many churches today still have strict rules on who can share together at the Communion table. A few years ago, I heard a story about a church where a group of people wearing rainbow badges in open support of LGBT people were refused Communion. One person who did receive Communion took his piece of bread and started to break it into pieces to share with those who had been excluded, and they began to celebrate joyfully together. The church leaders were so angered by this that they called the police. In some parts of the world this response is still not uncommon.

It's so much easier to *save* the lost than it is to *welcome* the lost. Saving the lost is about making them like us. It's about power, where we control who is allowed into the club. But welcoming is about vulnerability and intimacy, treating as equals people who may not be like us at all. Saving is about a crowd of insiders fixing an outsider before letting them in. Welcoming is accepting that you and they are equally lost, equally loved, equally sought, equally found, and equally rejoiced over.

God rejoices when the religious insiders in all of us change our minds about who should be included. The rejoicing happens when the ninety-nine are reunited with the one and the community is whole again.