

We are given more than we are promised.

Luke introduces Jesus' response to the grumbling religious leaders by writing, *so he told them this parable.*

And then Jesus tells two.

In addition to that chestnut about the shepherd and the lost sheep, Jesus adds a bonus story about the woman and the lost coin.

Maybe they are the same parable, the same story told two different ways, but the differences are striking.

The focus of the first story is a man, the second a woman.

Presumably, the sheep got lost by wandering off; presumably, the coin did not.

Presumably, the sheep was in a lot more danger in the open than the coin was under the couch.

And while the shepherd has wide open spaces to navigate in his search, the woman's hunt is confined to her modest, windowless house.

It is as easy for an inanimate object in a small space to get lost as it is for an animal in an open expanse.

And that is part of the singular story that Jesus is trying to tell with his double parable.

He speaks it looking into the fixed, firmly set eyes of lost coins.

Those grumbling Pharisees and the scribes to whom he is talking are the valuable currency of God's people.

They never wander off.

They never deviate from the tight paths prescribed by the law and the commentaries.

They are as reliable as the face value of a coin, and they move about as fast.

They are the practitioners and the guardians of holiness, a cherished world that means the state of being set apart.

Those who are holy are set apart for special purposes, but *set apart for* so quickly and insidiously turns into *set apart from*.

They are separate and therefore disconnected from the sinners and tax collectors.

They are not part the hoi polloi, the common people of Israel hunted and haunted by God's anything-but-common love.

They have never left the house, but still they are lost.

So Jesus is trying to spark a fire, to light a lamp, to sweep their dusty assumptions, to search them out until he finds them too.

This is such good news for those of us who are lost inside the church.

We know from countless conferences and crusades and testimonies and brochures and outreach strategies and special mailings and church evangelism seminars and revivals that Jesus the Good Shepherd wants to find those lost sinners adrift in the perilous wilds of the wicked world.

It is true, and so Jesus starts by pushing us to leave behind the 99 standing around going nowhere--forgive me for assuming that means the church!--and to engage in the urgent search for those outside of our gathered but incomplete flock.

But Jesus does not tell only that story.

Jesus also tells the autobiographical parable of the woman who looks inside the house for the statically lost as well.

With so many different ways for us to become disconnected from one another and from the God who treasures us, it is important for us to hear that we can be in God's well swept house, never move an inch, and still be lost.

Those of us standing pat, staying put, staying separate from all the other nickels and dimes because we don't like change...we are the reason the Holy Spirit has to sweep the church and light new fires and turn over the holy house because God is looking also for us.

A healthy community of Christ is one that is living both stories.

There is both inreach and outreach, ministry for those on the inside and for those on the outside, with a table that welcomes sinners, tax collectors, scribes, Pharisees, holy people, hypocrites, saints and scoundrels together.

Because all of us, all of us, are lost.

*There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance*, Jesus says, because frankly there aren't that many.

Sinner or scribe, set apart or drifted away, wandering or sedentary, self-destructive or stuck in the mud, overexposed out there or too safe in here, scared and alone or scared and together, we are all one way or another lost.

And we are all as helpless as a dim-sighted, dimwitted lamb chop with no GPS or a coin trying to make its own way into a pocket.

Don't be fooled by the self-help section at your local bookstore; the reason that there are so many of those books is that we really don't know what we are doing.

Everybody can write a book when nobody has the answer.

We can often get ourselves lost but we have never found the way to get ourselves found.

What makes Jesus two very different stories and all of our very different stories the same story is the shared and maddening truth that we are lost and we cannot save ourselves.

And maybe the strongest evidence of all is our thinking that we can.

I am still haunted by the story that one of our long time members told me this summer.

Barbara Keller, for whom we pray every week, had a massive stroke in July.

She collapsed in her bathroom, unable to move her left side, a heap on the floor unable to reach for a phone, unable to scream, as helpless as a lost coin.

She stayed there for two full days...praying, waiting, hoping against hope to be found alive.

She was utterly helpless, as are we all when we are most honest with ourselves.

But there is more that connects these many stories and brings them together, like a full flock or a complete set of coins, into one complete story with a deliriously happy ending.

It is not only the sad word *lost* that all the stories share.

They also share the beautiful word *until*.

The shepherd keeps looking *until* the sheep is found.

The woman keeps searching *until* the coin is found.

God, Jesus tells those lost Pharisees and scribes and sinners and tax collectors and stroke victims and Lutherans, keeps looking *until* God finds you.

For Barbara, it was two days, which must have felt like forever twice over.

For some of us, it takes God decades of searching.

For all of us, the impossible good news is that the persistence of God is stronger even than our

total weakness, that the will of God to find us is somehow even more relentless than our propensity for getting lost.

God searches until.

And when we are found, whether that is in one life-changing moment or across a gradual process, whether it is on this side of the dark line we name death or the other, we discover that when God finds us, we are given even more than we are promised.

It turns out that Luke's double story is actually a triple story.

Jesus follows this one parable that is really two with a third version, the story we often call the prodigal son.

A father has two sons, one who stays home, one who ventures out into the world, both of whom in one way or another gets lost.

The younger son wanders off like a lost sheep while the older son, with the steady value of the lost coin, never leaves the house.

But the Father runs outside after both of them.

God the Father chases after every last one of the children, sheep and coin alike, far away and close to home.

God the good shepherd goes to the ends of the earth and the end of his life to find every wayward sinner while God the Holy Spirit lights the lamp and sweeps the church until every last one of us sinners lost inside her house is found too.

God searches and searches and searches until.

God searches with the patience of the prodigal Father and the persistence of Barbara, who is now beginning to walk again, with a long-suffering effort that only the shepherd and the woman of the house can truly appreciate.

God searches for us not for awhile but until.

And when, not if, but when we are found, God celebrates.

All the friends come over, all the angels wear beads and party hats, all of heaven trembles with delight, and the joy is so much more than we are promised.

Whether you feel lost or found, outsider or insider, saint or sinner, or more probably both, God says to you, "The table is ready and the party is on.

Thanks for coming.

I am so glad you're here.

Rejoice with me!"