

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE 15:1-7 (LOST & FOUND)

Luke 15:1-7 | Luke Knight

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Luke 15:1-7 *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*

Is there anything like the relief and joy of finding something you treasure when you thought it was gone for good? I once lost a very expensive key on the Fort-to-Fort trail, and got surprisingly charismatic when I found it - hallelujahs all over the place! The intense focus of searching and hoping, the frantic energy, all of a sudden turns on a dime when the lost thing is found. The wallet was in the coat pocket the whole time. The child was just around the corner at the grocery store. And then you've just got to tell someone the story, don't you? To share some of the *joy* when what was lost is recovered. The inverse is also true; the sorrow of losing what you'd hope to find but disappointingly don't. We've all been deeply moved these last weeks of the stories coming out of Türkiye and Syria and the search for survivors in the aftermath of the earthquake. In the wake of such tragedy there are no ready-made answers to our looming questions. But when disaster strikes and everyone *scatters in fear*, as we've seen this past year in Ukraine, and now in Türkiye and Syria, there is some hope in keeping an eye out for those *running toward the danger*. No matter how bad it gets there's always someone running into the chaos, rather than away, to help and heal. And when in times like these we ask ourselves, "where is God in all this?", which is a pretty dire but necessary question, one answer might be that God can be found in every act of self-sacrifice and compassion one human shares with another. Theological explanations of pain and suffering only take us so far. Sometimes the best thing is to hear the stories and look for God in the flesh and blood of human kindness. That is, after all where we find Jesus: God among us, recovering what was lost through one human life. One life taking all the world's pain and suffering head on. I wonder if that's still where God can be found today, in lives full of compassion and sacrifice - the long suffering ones, the stubborn few searching for the loved and lost. One thing is certain - lost and found stories turn our emotional dials to the max.

On Parables & Luke's Gospel

Some talk as though God has the emotional capacity of a rock. But you only need read Luke 15 to find a different picture of God according to Jesus. Luke 15 carries three stories Jesus' tells to depict how impassioned God is about human recovery and redemption. The rule of three is still in use today in comedy and rhetoric, and Jesus uses it with great impact in this dramatic triple. These are among Jesus' most vivid and loved stories: the shepherd with a lost lamb on his shoulders; the woman clutching a lost coin to her chest; the father sprinting to the lost son. These are tender, energetic images, seared into the western imagination, short-hand for the God Jesus wants us to meet.

I should say that describing these stories from Jesus only as "stories" isn't entirely accurate. Technically, they're what we call in literature, *parables*. The word *parable* means to lay something alongside something else (from the same root as *parallel*). So when Jesus shares a *parable*, he's laying a story or image alongside the deep truths of God, helping us to access, understand, even be moved by his meaning. When Jesus shares a parable he's saying, "Let me put it this way" or "let me give you an example" and follows with a creative device to help people get the picture. Jesus employs parables to illustrate what God and God's kingdom is like, or sometimes to contrast what God or God's kingdom is like. Jesus is probably history's most inspiring and enduring story-teller and poet, you'd be hard pressed to find his equal.

I love Jesus' parables. And I think if we apply ourselves to hearing *these three* parables, as we're doing over the next few weeks, we open ourselves to the possibility of meeting again, or for the very first time, the God Jesus wants us to meet. A God not characterized by ambivalence or neglect, but by ferocious singlemindedness about human value and redemption. A God unsatisfied that you or me or the kid next door are lost. A God not with the emotional range of a rock, but deeply movable, and eager to celebrate when the lost are found. As the father says upon the return of his wayward son at the end of Luke 15: *we had no choice but to throw a party!*

Jesus shares these three parables at a dinner party. As usual Jesus is hanging out with all the wrong people – at least the wrong kind of people in the minds of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. *What's Jesus doing eating with such an ungodly crowd?* (they mutter). *Doesn't he know what they do for a living, the kind of depraved choices they've made?* Yet there's Jesus, not glad handing the rabble for a photo opportunity like a posturing politician, but *eating with people* thought to be on the outskirts of God's interest – the unsanitary people. It's a common theme in Luke's gospel, Jesus making the outsiders insiders, the sick well, the grubby clean. Jesus isn't infected by people's sin, as the religious leaders worry, but infects people with grace and life. So in the Gospels Jesus is portrayed as a kind of walking antidote to sin and death. Whatever Jesus touches becomes clean, is made alive. And the response to all this in Luke's gospel is usually *joy*, so that more often than not a party tends to follow in Jesus' wake. Notice that in all three stories the joy comes *first* from the heart of the one who has done the searching and the finding. These are not stories about how *people should be happy* that God has rescued them. These are stories about how *thrilled God is* to have brought humans in from the cold. For Jesus, the good news doesn't just give humanity cause for joy – the joy begins with God!

The three stories in Luke 15 are probably designed to build on each other, as each lost thing grows in value based on ratios and relationship. A sheep, a source of income, is valuable, one of one hundred. A coin, possibly representing a dowry, more valuable, one of ten. A child (could anything be more precious to us?), one son of two.

The Lost Sheep

The story we read earlier is the first – the lost sheep. The picture is of someone scouring the hillside for one stray sheep from a of a flock of one hundred and finding it. A flock of one hundred sheep in Jesus' day was a sizable and profitable group. But you imagine that if a smaller flock was missing a greater number of sheep there'd be greater concern. So you have to wonder: *why not cut your losses with just one sheep missing? Is it really worth the trouble when you've got ninety-nine to fall back on?* That's how we tend to think about things. Pros and cons. Return on investment. Cost of doing business. We apply our economics and value metrics endlessly across all kinds of matters. The chief sins of our fast-paced society are to be *inefficient* or *unproductive*, or worse yet, to find ourselves being *inconvenienced* in a convenience obsessed time. But deep down underneath all that we each know the value of things won *inconveniently*, especially when it comes to people. There is a check for us here, in our hyper-productive time, to ask if we're attributing value to things using the metrics of convenience and productivity alone. The Pharisees and teachers of the law weren't placing much value on Jesus' fellow dinner guests. *Those people* were written off as superfluous to requirements or were getting in the way of Israel coming into her glory. Why was Jesus bothering with *them*, seemingly making himself unclean through association? As we see over again in Luke's gospel, Jesus was *bothering with them* because when it comes to God *no one* is surplus to requirements. God doesn't weigh you or me and come to the conclusion that his return on investment isn't worthwhile. God scours the hillside until he finds the one stray sheep. Jesus and his kingdom have room for anyone and everyone who wants in. And not *just room*, because as we see in the life of Jesus, God *goes looking* for dinner guests. Jesus is about new creation, not merely managing religious outcomes.

A lot has been said about leaving the other ninety-nine sheep to go looking for the one. Surprisingly, or maybe unsurprisingly, some have worried about whether the flock is of higher or lesser priority. All kinds of ideas have been applied, few of which Jesus intends here. But it's telling that when the focus of a story is so clearly about the lost sheep and the joy of reconciliation, we still tend towards fretting about the concerns of the majority. Is the flock safe? Does the shepherd care less about the group than the individual? These questions miss the point. Yes, the flock is safe. And a group is only made up of individuals, anyway, so it's not an either-or scenario. People are not more or less valuable just because they're in a group. So why is it that we become preoccupied with these sorts of questions? Why is the majority always anxious about majority concerns? There's an easy answer, but it's hard to swallow. The answer is that all of us have to get used to the idea of a God who can love everyone, all of the time, without capacity, with total freedom. We don't know how

to do that, and prior to God we've never met anyone who can. For us, there's always a favourite in every environment, if not in principle, then at least in practical application. In the home, the workplace, in friend groups. Even if we don't like playing favourites, we *still kind of have to*, because we are limited creatures. We focus on boundaries pragmatically because we're aware of being diminished if we give away too much. There's only so much of us to go around. But Jesus' life and death and life again, says that this is not the case with God. There's no withdrawal limit on God's good resources. God wants every last sheep on the hillside and doesn't have to choose one over the other. *There's always more than enough grace to go around.* It takes us our whole lives to learn this truth together in community as God slowly draws each of us out of a scarcity mentality and into the realities of grace. As our friend Ian shared last week, the solution to poverty is not wealth. The solution to poverty is generosity.

So, in the story the one lost sheep is valued, searched for, and found. When I crack the door coming home from work, our one-year-old comes tearing around the corner, throws up her arms, and shouts "Daddy!" Usually I'll shove her aside and make my way to the couch take a load off and open a cold one. *Of course I don't!* Picking her up I shout, "Phoebe, hello!", give her a big wet kiss, and squeeze her till she's about to burst. That's the joy she and I share after being separated for just a day. Now connect that image to Jesus when next he says of the lost sheep, *"And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home."* What an image. No lecture about wandering off. No sighs or eye rolls. No, "this is strike one of three, so watch it". Just joy and a safe home on the horizon. The problem is that some of us don't really believe that God's primary response to finding or meeting us is *joy*. But there it is all over Luke's gospel, time and again. Jesus finding people, and buckets full of joy. The Gospels tell us that God doesn't love us with a cold reluctance out of obligation. God loves us with the fire of a thousand suns. As we'll see in the third story in a few short weeks, God doesn't saunter our way when he sees us returning home on the horizon. God runs!

And as we see in this first story, the sheep story, the joy can't be contained. Friends and neighbours are called together to celebrate. Remember the religious leaders had been asking Jesus: *why are you eating with all these unsanitary people?* These stories are a kind of explanation about Jesus' activity. So his response is something like: *I'm celebrating because these people matter as much to God as you do, and I'm bringing them home! So get with the program or don't cramp our party!* And then Jesus sticks the landing, *"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."* One scholar notes that we might hear a little sarcasm in Jesus' voice there. If not careful the self-righteous will find themselves on the outside of the rescue party looking in. After all, who among us hasn't been lost, in desperate need of finding? We're all just sheep, and there's only one true Shepherd.

Let's close simply today by asking a few questions in light of this story:

- Is there anyone you think of as too far gone for God to retrieve and restore? Is there anyone you've written off or have given up on? (including yourself)
- Do you need a more gospel-coloured, Jesus-shaped view and experience of God? What changes for you when you hear that God is very often full of joy?
- Would you take a moment to share with God, again, or for the first time in this simple moment, his great joy over finding you and bringing you home?