

Lost Lives

A sermon for September 11, 2016

Luke 15:1-10

[Lansdowne UMC](#)

Luke chapter 15, which we read from this morning, has three parables. Because the third one is quite long we only read the first two. There's one about a lost sheep, one about a lost coin, and one about a lost son. The last of those is commonly called the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Our reading has us think about lost sheep and lost coins. But today leads us to consider lost sons and daughters, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers-- specifically those that were lost 15 years ago today at the twin towers, the Pentagon, and a field just north of Shanksville, PA.

My own experience surrounding the attacks of September 11th is relatively typical, I suppose. I watched in horror and disbelief as the Towers fell on live TV. I watched smoke billowing from what seemed at the time to be a small hole in the Pentagon, but which I now know was an area the size of a shopping mall. At the time, given the scenes on TV and the general feeling of chaos, I expected the death toll to be 10 times what it ended up being-- 4 shy of 3,000-- obviously still a deeply devastating number.

I discovered that day that the Towers themselves meant something to me. Perhaps it was the fact that as a child, my parents gave me the opportunity to experience the disorienting and beautiful view of the roof of the World Trade Center. Or maybe it was something deeper than that. Although I certainly didn't realize it at the time, by choosing to attack

the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the attackers physically and symbolically struck what I valued most about America-- our financial and military dominance.

And perhaps like many Americans, I continue to grieve from that day 15 years ago. Every so often, I find that the pain resurfaces. I get caught up in thinking about the helplessness of the people who were on those planes, or trapped in their target buildings. Sometimes, it's a movie or a documentary that causes me to relive it. Or sometimes I think about Katie's Uncle, a retired New York City Firefighter who lost eight men from his squad when the towers collapsed. Other times it's just realizing the degree to which that day has directed the course of world history.

I remember President Bush addressing the nation and saying that "our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts." Our freedom came under attack.

The blessing of freedom is that it allows all of us to pursue our dreams. The curse of freedom, is that it is very difficult to stop people whose dreams are to do violence. And so we are constantly having to do the calculation of how much freedom we can give up in order to secure our freedom to live another day-- whether at the airport, or the ball park, or even in our homes.

Of course, God created us with free will. We were created to love God, and a being without free will is unable to choose to love. And certainly being forced to love is not love at all. We have a name for such a thing whose actions are completely determined by its creator: a robot.

God did not create robots, but in an act of incredible generosity, God created us to share in the very essence of who God is: God created us for Love. God is Love, and God created us to love.

But even though we're created for Love, God gives us the choice for how we direct our love. Will it be directed toward the Creator or toward the creature? Will the object of our love be infinite or finite? Will we love something worthy or something empty?

As we considered two weeks ago-- sermons available on lansdowneumc.org!-- humanity chose to love and worship the creature rather than the creator. In doing this, humanity's ability to choose God was given away too. You become like what you worship. Remember that?

But look at what happens when Jesus comes on the scene. Luke chapter 15 begins with these words:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus is hanging out with all the wrong people! And when the Pharisees and the scribes grumble about it, Jesus has to tell 3 parables to bring home what's going on.

Jesus is like a shepherd who leaves those sheep who have not gotten lost and goes to seek out that 1 sheep that is lost. And when he finds it, he brings it back to the flock, calls all his friends and neighbors together and says, "I found the sheep that was lost! Let's Party!"

Then Jesus tells us the point of the parable: “Just so... there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

So as Jesus goes about his ministry, preaching and bringing God’s Kingdom, he finds that the people who are responding are not the religious elite, but the down-and-out. The universally hated tax collectors are repenting. The people whose lives are openly characterized by sin are repenting. And whenever that happens, we have to celebrate, because Heaven itself celebrates.

That word, repent, is as loaded word. I don’t know about you, but in my mind it conjures images of a sidewalk preacher with a bull-horn. That’s... not a particularly positive image for me.

In order to understand what Jesus is talking about, it’s incredibly important to understand this word. To repent doesn’t simply mean to say “sorry.” It literally means turning around.

Imagine that there is a sheep who has wandered away from the flock. The shepherd comes out in search of the lost sheep. As the shepherd calls out, the sheep hears the shepherd’s voice and begins to bleat-- to cry. The sheep then *turns* and walks toward the shepherd.

To repent is to turn. It’s to change directions. Jesus’ call to repent isn’t because God is throwing a fit and demands an apology. It’s because we have free will, and if we want to walk with the shepherd, we have to stop walking away. We have to turn around and face the one who pursues us.

Now, without pressing the analogy too hard, certainly when we go the wrong way, when we sin, God is due an apology. But the apology itself is an acknowledgement of the reality that we have already turned around. It's a reflection of a changed heart and a changed life. An apology is not a set of magical words that mean that it's ok that we're still walking away from God.

That's why to repent is to have a change of heart and life. It's an outward change-- a change in the direction in which you're walking. But it's also an inward change-- a will and a desire to walk toward Jesus rather than away from Jesus.

If a sheep is lost, it cannot find its way back to the flock without the shepherd first coming out to meet it, to show it the way or to carry it home.

We call this God's prevenient grace. We are unable to find our way back to God in and of ourselves. We can't simply turn ourselves toward God.

But in Christ, God has sought us out. Christ calls the lost sheep to come to him. Once the sheep hear his voice, then the sheep can choose to turn and cry out, or keep going in the wrong direction and stay lost.

In God's prevenient grace, God in Christ reaches out to us while we are still facing the wrong way, and *then* we are able to respond and cry out to Christ. We are able to turn and face the one who is seeking us out. And having turned-- having repented-- the possibility is open that we can be restored to our place at the shepherd's side.

We are told in chapter 19 of Luke that Jesus' mission is "to seek and save the lost." I think the parable of the lost coin is meant to teach us that. The coin has no ability to cry out, but the woman searches meticulously until she finds it. In the same way, Jesus seeks out those who are separated from God. But so that we don't press this image too hard and think we have no need to respond to the one who searches us out, Jesus says again, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents"

Jesus seeks the lost. The lost repent. And heaven has a party.

But some people don't want to party. The scribes and the Pharisees couldn't handle the fact that these tax collectors and sinners were being welcomed into the people of God. After all, maybe these coins that had been lost were a little... rough around the edges. They'd changed their lives, but because they had been lost, they were still broken and in need of healing.

Returning sheep sometimes find themselves bruised and battered from the realities of life apart from the shepherd. They need the medicine of the shepherd and the compassionate support of the flock. Perhaps they're hungry, because that lush patch of grass that lured them away from the flock in the first place turned out to be nothing more than an illusion. They need to be led by the shepherd to the sources of food that will actually satisfy them and enable them to grow and flourish. Or perhaps there is a returning sheep that has come through the ordeal surprisingly unscathed.

Whatever the case, the message of the parables is the same: Jesus says, let's celebrate.

The scribes and the Pharisees think they're just fine. And so I imagine Jesus has a bit of a smirk on his face when he tells them "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Jesus seems to cast doubt on the fact that these 99 who need no repentance even exist. The scribes and the Pharisees will think that they're in that category, yet they deny the work of God in Christ to seek and save the lost. It seems to me that they themselves have some turning around to do.

But I don't want to be hyper-focused on the lost, even as we acknowledge the loss of life on 9/11, 15 years ago. Those lives were lost to their families, but we trust that they were not lost to God. Let's talk instead about those who are found.

I heard a story about the day the Pentagon was attacked that I heard like a parable of Jesus. Colonel Marilyn Wills was working in the western side of the Pentagon when the plane struck. The smoke and the fire quickly made it impossible to see the way to safety, but Colonel Wills thought she knew the direction of the nearest window. A woman behind her held on to her as they crawled together through the heat and the darkness. Finally, in despair, the other woman said that she couldn't go any further. Colonel Wills told her "I'm not telling your children I left you here... get on my back, I'm going to carry you." Eventually they made it to the window and were able to get it cracked open enough to crawl out to safety. I can only imagine the joy of the people outside the

window when they saw Colonel Wills and those she was with escaping the fire.

Apart from our Savior we're helplessly lost. We're groping in the dark. Sometimes we even give up. But praise God that our Savior is there to carry us to safety.