

WHAT'S LOST IS FOUND AGAIN

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Psalm 119:1-3, 165-176; Luke 15:1-10

“When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’”

Luke 15:9

It’s not the sort of problem anybody would want to have: finding a lost car at Disney World. But every day, I’m told, hundreds of people — after a long day riding rides and trying to track down the elusive Mickey Mouse — have exactly that problem.

It’s exacerbated by the fact that a lot of those cars are rentals. Some people forget not only the make and model of the car they rented, but even the color.

With tens of thousands of parking places to search, even if you do know your car’s particulars, it can quite a challenge to find it.

Well, the Disney “cast” — what they call their employees — is legendary for customer service. Their “parking cast” does have a few tricks for helping reunite customers with their ride.

Most people, if they forget their parking place number or even what type of car they’re driving, do remember roughly what time they arrived at the park. Disney opens each of the lots in a regular sequence — with a new lot opening only after another is nearly filled. That means that, if the customers remember their arrival time,

the parking cast can make a pretty good guess as to which lot the wayward car is in. Then, they drive the park visitors all around that lot, and tell them to keep clicking the panic button on their electronic key fob. Most of the time, they hear the honking horn and see the flashing lights in minutes.

Would that everything we lose in life could be so easily found!

Jesus has several parables about things that are lost and found again. There are three of them, one after another, in the 15th chapter of Luke.

The most famous is the last of the three — the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In that story, of course, it's *a person* — the younger son, who takes the money and journeys to a far country — who's lost. But here, in the first part of the chapter, it's a lost sheep and a lost coin.

For centuries, Bible scholars have had a standard way of understanding Jesus' parables. They've used a method known as "allegory." That's a big word for something very simple. In an allegorical interpretation, you figure each character symbolizes something very specific. For example, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the lost son symbolizes a wayward sinner and the loving father symbolizes God.

Luke himself turns our minds in that direction: after he tells of the shepherd's joy in finding the lost sheep, he says, "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in

heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Then he says much the same thing at the end of the Parable of the Lost Coin.

For years, I took Luke’s allegorical interpretation at face value: until I read a book that convinced me it can’t be the meaning Jesus originally intended.

The book — called *Short Stories by Jesus* — is by a New Testament scholar named Amy-Jill Levine. Even though she’s a professor of New Testament at a Christian seminary, Amy-Jill is Jewish. And, it turns out, that gives her a unique advantage in understanding parables told by first-century Jewish rabbis: including Jesus, who was — after all — a rabbi.

We Christians, of course, see him as much more than that. We confess him to be our Lord and savior, both truly God and truly human. But that still doesn’t take away the fact that, in his human aspect, Jesus taught in the rabbinical tradition.

That means, if we want to know what Jesus meant by these stories of a lost sheep and a lost coin, it really helps to take off our Christian spectacles for a moment and try to see the story with first-century Jewish eyes.

There were lots of rabbis from that time and place who told parables. But one thing they didn’t usually do was add explanations: to say “The moral of this story

is...” They just put the story out there. They let it hang in plain sight. Then they’d say something like what Jesus often says at the end of his parables: “Let those who have ears, hear.”

Some student sitting there would conclude one thing, and another student something different. They would then debate one another — which, as any good teacher knows, is where the real learning takes place.

Remember, it’s not Jesus who tacks on the explanations of what these two parables mean. It’s Luke: a Greek-speaking Christian convert, writing many years after Jesus’ resurrection.

But what if we set the ready-made explanation aside for a moment and try to hear these stories as Jesus’ first listeners, his Jewish disciples, would have heard them? What if we try to understand these parables as stories, not theological treatises — what do we get?

We get a shepherd who loses a sheep, goes off searching for it, and is overjoyed when he finds it. And we get a woman who loses a valuable coin, then cleans her house from top to bottom, searching for it. She’s overjoyed when she discovers it hiding in a corner with the dust-bunnies.

So, what do those two very simple stories mean?

There’s one little detail hiding in the midst of them that most Christian

interpreters have historically overlooked: and I have to confess I did, too, until I read Professor Levine's book. But there it is, hiding in plain sight — and once you know it's there, you can never read these parables again without noticing it.

The detail is this: the main characters in both these stories are very wealthy people. Look at the shepherd: he's got a flock of a hundred sheep. No shepherd listening to Jesus' parable as he told it would have had anywhere near so many animals! That's no flock of sheep: it's an agribusiness. . Look at the woman: she's got ten silver coins. How many peasant women sitting there listening, in that subsistence society, would ever have imagined she'd one day hold ten silver coins in her hand? *Not a one.*

Jesus could perfectly well have told his parables about a shepherd with five sheep, or a householder with two coins — but he doesn't. It's important to him that, when his peasant audience hears these stories, it's like they're watching that old TV show, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.

And *why* is that important? It's important because his listeners could scarcely have believed that a person who had so much could have gotten so wrought-up over losing so little (comparatively speaking). The shepherd, as they understand it, is a little bit crazy. He leaves *ninety-nine* sheep on their own to go looking for the missing one? As for the woman with the ten coins: if she's that wealthy, she'll just use one of

the other coins to buy whatever she needs, and figure the other one will soon turn up; or, she'll just ask her servant-girl to sweep out the house for her, instead of doing it herself.

The remarkable thing Jesus' listeners would have all noticed is that, despite their wealth, these two do pay very close attention to what they've lost.

There's something else about this story that doesn't come out in most conventional interpretations. Most people, when teaching the Parable of the Lost Sheep, follow Luke's lead — his explanation about joy in heaven for the sinner who repents. That means *they blame the sheep for getting lost*.

Jesus' listeners — who, unlike Luke, knew a good deal about shepherding — would not have done that. Sheep do wander — it's what sheep do — but a good shepherd, they know, takes account of that tendency. A good shepherd is vigilant. That's the shepherd's job.

As for the woman with the lost coin, it makes absolutely no sense to blame the coin for getting lost: but that's what you'd be forced to conclude, if you walk back the interpretation Luke suggests. If the parable's about the heavenly welcome for repentant sinners, then how can a coin repent?

No, what Jesus most likely means is that both the shepherd and the householder

are at fault for losing those valuable items. Neither the shepherd nor the householder symbolize God. They're just two people who've lost things. They're almost comical figures, those two: wealthy misers who — quite apart from all the loot they have — turn everything topsy-turvy looking for the one thing they've foolishly lost.

If these uber-wealthy people go nuts trying to get their property back, then wouldn't you who have just five sheep do even more to find the one you'd lost? And wouldn't you who have just two coins turn your household upside down to find the fifty percent of your life's savings that's disappeared?

Luke tells us the parable is about repentance and forgiveness, but surely — the way Jesus originally told it — it's not about that at all. It's about losing something, then rejoicing at finding it once again!

I recall something that happened to me once, in a supermarket parking lot in Point Pleasant Beach, where we used to live.

There I was, pushing my cart across the asphalt, feeling in my pocket for the key to the trunk, when I sensed a presence looming beside me. It was a car: one of those big, old luxury models, the kind we used to refer to as “a boat.” Behind the wheel was a silvery-haired woman. She was looking right at me. I'd never laid eyes on her before. With a whirring sound, the power window went down.

I took a step toward her, supposing she wanted to ask for directions. But no: this woman had something different in mind. “I just have to tell somebody about this,” she said. “I was just shopping at this store, and I got all the way back home before I realized I’d left my purse behind. I raced back here as fast as I could, and went back in — and do you know, the purse was still there! Here it is,” she said — holding it up for me to see — “everything's still inside it.”

“Well, I’m happy for you,” said I.

“You probably think I’m silly,” the woman went on, “but I just had to tell somebody! Thanks for listening.” With that, the power window whooshed back up, and she drove off.

She just had to tell somebody. Something of great value had been lost, and found again.

So — what have *you* lost, in life?

Is it some money you once had, that went away in a bad investment?

Is it a marriage or friendship that went bad — partly through your own fault?

Is it some dream you once had when you were younger: a shimmering goal that somehow got lost amidst the dailyness of life?

Is it, perhaps, good health you once took for granted, and can do so no longer?

Is it a loved one — parent, spouse, sibling, friend, child — who's fallen before that last and greatest enemy: death?

We try our best, most of us, to put a good face on the circumstances of our lives. We try to think positively. We look in the mirror and reassure ourselves that every cloud has a silver lining. We hope for the best. Yet, to be perfectly realistic, our human lives — like the lives of everyone who's ever been born — are marked by one loss after another. Nobody gets a free pass. Not even the guy with a hundred sheep. Nor the housewife with a small fortune in silver.

The trick in living this life most faithfully is to strive to embrace the losses: yes, to love the good things life gives us for as long as we have them, knowing we never completely possess any of them. I'd like to think this gets a little easier the older we get: the more we all come to realize that everything dear to us is on loan. Even life itself.

Yet, the bright truth these simple parables teach is that the precious treasures we lose in life are, by the grace of God, never fully lost. As the mystical New Jersey poet, Walt Whitman, wrote, in a little poem called "Continuities":

**Nothing is ever really lost, or can be lost,
No birth, identity, form — no object of the world.
Nor life, nor force, nor any visible thing;
Appearance must not foil, nor shifted sphere confuse thy brain.
Ample are time and space — ample the fields of Nature.**

**The body, sluggish, aged, cold — the embers left from earlier fires,
The light in the eye grown dim, shall duly flame again;
The sun now low in the west rises for mornings and for noons continual;
To frozen clods ever the spring's invisible law returns,
With grass and flowers and summer fruits and corn.**

There was a time in the life of two of Jesus' disciples — who knows, maybe some of the same ones who'd sat at his feet and heard him speak of a lost sheep and a lost coin — that they mourned the loss of their Lord and master. He'd been crucified: and they'd not yet heard the good news of his resurrection.

Then they met a stranger, who overtook them on the road, as they were walking. They talked with him of spiritual things, and even of the daily news — the latest Roman crucifixion, the one that had torn their hearts in two.

They invited him home for dinner. And as he took the bread and broke it, they heard — ever so faintly — the bleating of a sheep, caught in a thicket. And they saw, winking at them from the corner of the room, the light of an oil lamp glinting off a silver coin.

Let us pray.

**Lord of all things lost, and of all things found:
we bring before you now our memories
of times past that will never return;
of things of this earth we've enjoyed that are no longer part of our lives;
of people we've cherished, whose touch we miss;**

**of dreams reluctantly set aside, because we chose a different course.
Yet, all the same, we rejoice in the good news of resurrection:
and by that powerful talisman we confess our bright hope
that everything lost, in this life or the next,
will be found again:
*even us.***

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