

Luke 15:1-10

## The Real Power of a Broom

A few years ago, author Kim Clarke found a letter written by her grandmother as she did research in a military casualty file at the National Archives in St. Louis. The letter reflects the angst of families whose loved ones had gone missing in action: “Could you please advise me if my husband’s body was ever found and if so where he is buried?” It was 1946, two years after learning her husband, Army Air Corps Corporal Delbert W. Trueman, was declared MIA and then dead, after enemy flak downed his B-24 bomber in Austria. She had no idea if his body had been recovered and, if so, where his remains were located.

Like hundreds of thousands of families, her grandmother was left with a Western Union telegram bearing the worst fear of every family. After that initial shock, there was nothing - with no body, no casket, and no funeral. Mortuary files, personal letters, newspaper obituaries, and wartime correspondence show us how families grieved in the lengthy absence of their loved ones.

Her husband’s presence was lost but so was his body. Corporal Trueman certainly did not care that his body was lost. He had given his life for his country, for freedom, and for the rights to govern ourselves. Still, for the thousands back home, the lost was real. Since the start of the war, men and women who died overseas remained where they had fallen. The ships in Pearl Harbor were still burning when the War Department ordered that no American service member who died overseas be shipped home. From Algiers to Saipan and Bastogne, the dead would remain buried near battlefields or left unrecovered—typically after planes crashed in remote areas—until all fighting ceased. Ships, aircraft, and ports were not equipped to transport and store the dead. The government committed resources to fighting the war, not managing its carnage, Clarke wrote.

In the fall of 1945, Congress took up legislation to bring home its dead. But, unlike during World War I, when most American casualties were in France, this conflict posed a tremendous logistical challenge of recovering bodies scattered across Allied and enemy territory on six continents. If an estimated 300,000 bodies were to be recovered and returned, the cost would be \$195 million—approximately \$2.6 billion today.

Congress unanimously approved the Return of the Dead Program in May 1946 and President Harry Truman immediately signed off on an initial \$92.5 million for the work. The job fell to the American Graves Registration Service, the Transportation Corps, and thousands of civilian employees. Moving from country to country, they located graves, disinterred and formally identified remains, prepared bodies for permanent burials, and sent them home by ships and trains. There were complications and delays. The first war dead did not reach American shores until October 1947. When the inaugural shipload of bodies from Europe arrived in New York, more than 400,000 people turned out to pay tribute.

Jesus spoke often about being lost and we can see one example in our text today. The fifteenth chapter of Luke is a well known chapter. So well known, that we often read it, feel good, and then go on to something else but let’s not do that today. The setting of the text is a common theme. Jesus has skipped out on the church potluck and has chosen instead, to spend his time with the neighborhood scum. Jesus is ignoring the good church folks to hang out with the people that the neighborhood association has tried to drive out for years. The good church folks cannot

understand it. Jesus claims to be so close to God and yet, he chooses the wrong company. He eats with folks who are unclean. Jesus can see their annoyance and he addresses it by telling three parables.

The key to understanding these three parables is seeing the differences in the audiences Jesus is addressing. The text identifies the differences by profession in a way. One group is tax-collectors, prostitutes, and folks that hang-out at the local pool hall. The other group includes Pharisees and scribes. Luke further divides them in the verbs he uses. The tax-collectors and sinners are hearing Jesus. They are listening and responding. The Pharisees and scribes are doing something else – they are grumbling and murmuring. They are separated by what they do and how they respond to Jesus. But is that all? There has to be something else that causes such a difference. Jesus saw it and it was the reason he told the parables he told. Maybe if we look at those first two parables we can see it, too.

The first parable is the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd has one hundred sheep and he discovers that one sheep is missing. He leaves the ninety nine sheep to look for the one lost sheep. He searches until he finds it. He must have looked behind rocks and gone through briars. If you have ever been to the Holy Land, you know the wilderness is a dangerous place. There are lots of places for a sheep to get lost and they are not easy places to find or easy places for a rescue team to reach. When the shepherd finds the sheep, he does not just hook him with his staff and push him to safety. He picks him up, places him across his shoulders, and takes him home. When he reaches his house, he calls his friends and neighbors together and invites them to celebrate with him. The sheep that was lost has been found.

The second parable is the parable of the lost coin. Luke chooses a woman as his main character here. She has ten coins and has lost one. Rather than one in one hundred, we now have one in ten. She lights a lamp and takes a broom and sweeps the entire house until she finds it. Now some of you have shared stories with me about cleaning people you have known. I can picture this very thorough cleaning lady starting at one end of the house with a broom and a rag and leaving no corner untouched until she located the lost coin. When she finds it, she calls everyone she knows to come celebrate with her.

Even though the language is sparse, Jesus gives us just enough information to picture both scenes in our minds. We can visualize a shepherd and a housecleaner frantically seeking out what they had lost. We can picture them both having little regard for their own needs as they try to recover a sheep and a coin. We might describe them as being passionate or relentless in their pursuit. We can also visualize the moment of exultation when they find what was lost. We can see their joy as being contagious and everyone around celebrating with them.

But how did Jesus' listeners hear those two stories that day. No doubt, the folks who we called sinners heard that story and related to it. They recognized themselves as the lost sheep and lost coin. Perhaps they had even come so far as to see themselves as shepherds and cleaning women who were seeking out others who were lost and bringing them to Jesus. They remembered how it felt to be lost. They knew what it was like to be unreachable. They remembered what it was like to be lost and unable to be found. They also remembered the joy and the celebration.

But how did the Pharisees and scribes hear those stories? How did those good church folks and religious types understand what Jesus was saying? Did they get it? Do we get it? Perhaps they can relate to pieces of the stories because they knew what it was like to lose objects and search to find them. They could remember that moment of joy and relief when a lost object was recovered. Or perhaps they were annoyed by the story because they kept their houses so neat and tidy that they never lost anything. We do not know what they thought because Luke does not tell us. But we can assume by their later actions of putting Jesus on a cross that they never understood. For them, those parables were meaningless because they could not relate to being lost.

The big difference in the two groups of people listening to Jesus that day was in their memory. The tax-collectors and sinners eating with Jesus that day had cause to celebrate – they remembered what it felt like to be without grace. They remembered those moments when they woke up alone in a strange place and did not know how to get home on their own. They remembered what it was like to be without God’s presence in their lives. They knew the utter emptiness of feeling damaged beyond repair. They knew shame. They knew embarrassment. They knew what it felt like to be sunned, ignored, and invisible. So when Jesus extended grace to them, they were stunned. Jesus saw them – not as damaged goods but as human beings. Jesus made them feel worthy. Jesus made them feel seen. They cherished the feeling of relief once the shepherd grabbed them and place them on his broad shoulders because they is what Jesus had done for them. They remembered the moment when the broom swept aside the garbage covering up their lives and they were found and restored and made whole again. They knew how important God was passionate and diligent and perseverant in seeking them out. They knew what those parables meant because they remember what it is to be lost.

The Pharisees and scribes had to be puzzled by this. Either they had forgotten what it was like to be lost or, like those bodies buried overseas, they were lost and had become distracted by so many things that they had yet to realize they were lost. They could not celebrate with Jesus that day because they had no reference point. They had no memory. For them, you used a lantern and a broom to clean the church.

My friends, without God, we all are lost. Some of us have more visible signs of being lost than others but that makes us no less lost. Some of us have woken up one morning and realized that we do not know where we are, how we got there, or where to go next. Some of us have looked at our lives and asked, “Is this all there is?” Some of us pacify our fears with many distractions. Some of us believe our religious backgrounds and upbringing keep us from being or feeling lost but for each of us, there is a moment when we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are no longer in control. We can no longer find our own way. We are lost. We realized we cannot find our way out. In that moment, we know that without God, we are doomed to self-destruction.

Friends, remember that moment. Remember the moment when grace touched your life and gave you hope. Do not ever forget it. Remember the despair you felt when you realized that you yourself lacked the power to save your own soul. Remember being lost then recall the moment when God’s hand reached down and lifted you up. Remember the moment when the garbage was swept away and Jesus took your hand. Remember the joy you felt at being redeemed. Remember that moment of grace and you will forever remember the real power of a broom.

