

There is a Jewish story you may have heard before that tells of the good fortune of a hardworking farmer. The Lord appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given double to his neighbor. The farmer, scarcely believing his good fortune, wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately he received a hundred cattle, and he was overjoyed until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred. So he wished for a hundred acres of land, and again he was filled with joy until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God's goodness, the farmer could not escape feeling jealous and slighted because his neighbor had received more than he. Finally, he stated his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye. And God wept.

Of course, every person upon hearing that story inwardly denies that *they* would ever do such a thing. We all would like to think that we could take the higher road and rejoice with our neighbor – no matter how many times his dogs have run over into our yard, or how often you've told him to get that tree that hangs over in your yard cut down. Yes, we could all be thankful and happy to see God's grace and mercy bestowed on another – even one whom we secretly don't really like. And that might very well be true, but I'm sure we'd be grumbling a bit under our breath, just like those Pharisees.

One of the things that continually strikes me about the parables – and I shouldn't keep getting surprised by this – is how Jesus has this incredible grasp of human nature *and* the kingdom of God. In the gospel of Luke especially, Jesus is constantly telling parables not just as a part of a sermon, but usually in response to human behavior taking place around him. In this case, Jesus tunes into the grumbling of the Pharisees – those religious leaders who are very set in the religious and social standards of the time. While making the decision whether they consider Jesus an acceptable religious leader based on his teachings and healings – they're also observing well, who he hangs out with, who he chooses to heal, who he befriends, where he spends his mealtimes. And they are not pleased with what they see: sinners, tax collectors, lepers, women – people on the edges of acceptable society – and certainly not good dinner companions for a religious leader of the time. To them – and to current religious law – these people are ritually unclean, they are beyond the bounds of the temple, beyond help and mercy.

Yet once again, Jesus sets out to once again shake the social and religious order – to take what people have known and turn it on its head. He tells three parables: The Lost parables or The Lost Ones. The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son. Today we look at two of those parables: sheep and coins.

Even the subjects in this story would have been offensive to the Pharisees: those who represent God and God's abundant grace are a shepherd and a woman. A shepherd was pretty low on the totem pole of Jewish society – they were not thought of as very reliable or holy people. And a woman, well, she was thought of as even less than that. Women were basically treated as property. They had very little legal or religious rights. For Jesus to have chosen these two figures shakes the very societal foundations upon which the Pharisees stood. Not only is Jesus claiming that God's grace is much bigger than the Pharisees thought – he's also saying that the very nature of God is greater than they ever imagined: a shepherd? A woman? Faithful figures pursuing the lost? If the Pharisees hadn't already been grumbling, these parables would've set them off!

Last Sunday at youth group we engaged in the spiritual practice of reading scripture called *Lectio Divina*. The best way I can describe *Lectio Divina* is that you slow down the reading of the scripture and really listen to what God's word is saying to you right then, right where you are. The youth group used *Lectio Divina* and explored these two parables. Much of the wisdom they shared from that experience is sprinkled throughout this sermon – including the title. Their responses to

the scripture were different from mine or the other adults present, and their insights came from their unique perspective as teenagers or almost teenagers who definitely function in a society based on specific social rules: middle or high school! For that shared experience, I give the youth group many thanks!

One of the questions asked during Lectio Divina is for the reader to wonder, “Who am I in this story?” And the responses were interesting: some of them definitely saw themselves as one of the sheep left behind while the shepherd goes looking for the lost one: One of those who fit in enough to be considered a “good one.” They weren’t in need of rescue. It reminded us of what its like to be in a classroom when there is a person causing trouble and acting out. Instead of being able to give the class full attention, the teacher has to focus in on the one causing trouble – and give them the attention they need to stay on task. How frustrating can it be to be one of those “good enough” people who has to sit and wait? How difficult it can be not to feel angry and spiteful towards the one causing trouble? How can we not just wish for justice and punishment to be handed down swiftly, so we can get back to normal and not have to give this person any more of our time? And how easy it is to leave ourselves in the “good enough” category and place others in the “sinner” category. Grumbling, grumbling.

While Jesus certainly calls for the repentance of those lost ones, of those sinners, that is not necessarily the focus of the parables. What strikes me is how much time and effort seems to be spent on the search. In searching for the lost sheep in the pastures and the lost coin through the house, it is the great exertion made by the searcher that Jesus emphasizes. It’s just how far God would go for every one of us – no matter how sinful we are, no matter who we are in society and its standards – to God, we are all valuable and worthy of searching for.

And then there’s the results of the search: a big celebration – on earth and in heaven. People are calling their neighbors and their friends, even God’s angels are celebrating the finding. The emphasis in these parables is not so much on calling those sinners to repentance – but on calling the ones who consider themselves “righteous” to join in the party – to celebrate the finding, to rejoice that one who was lost is now found and has come home. To encourage us to swallow back our grumbling: our bitterness, jealousy, even anger – and to be a part of God’s grace and mercy, not standing on the sidelines wishing for God’s judgment on everyone but “me.”

Because folks, we’re still grumbling today. Whether we can acknowledge it or not, there are still those people and situations that reach into us and make us want to cry out for justice and not mercy. Who or what do we grumble about? Who are those lost ones in need of God’s search and rescue – whose voices none but God can hear?

Could a lost one be that annoying acquaintance who thinks she’s your new best friend – calling you three times a day for no apparent reason – just chatting? The one who just makes you want to scream into the phone, “Get a life!” When that same woman is just masking her deep-seated loneliness that’s gotten worse and worse since her husband dies, and lately it’s just too much. We grumble, but she needs God’s mercy.

Or is the lost one that coworker of yours who just can’t seem to get any of his projects done on time or respond to your emails in a timely fashion? Everyone in the office has been complaining about him lately. Why doesn’t he just quit if he can’t hack it? And why isn’t the boss bringing down the hammer? What you don’t know is that his parents are reaching that point in their lives when they can no longer live on their own, and he’s trying to take care of them, and maintain his job that is going to help pay for their long-term care. We grumble, but he needs God’s mercy.

What about those folks who are homeless here in the city, despite all of the shelters (including the one this church built, thank-you very much). I mean, there’s enough beds and food in the city, right? Why do they have to bug me on the street or at the doors of the church? When the reality is, there’s not enough beds or free mental healthcare to help all our homeless – those men and women who were once somebody’s child. We grumble, but they need God’s mercy.

Or what about those workers. You know the ones I'm talking about, who come from our neighbors to the south to do jobs in America that most Americans wouldn't want to do. They're not here legally, why should they get any rights, steal my tax dollars, take American jobs? These folks are a threat to us, and don't belong (and how many folks say that while eating the fruits or vegetables of "those peoples" labor?). We grumble and grumble, but they need God's mercy.

And then there's that one person that's been in your life, maybe not right now, but you know who I'm talking about. That person who just rubs you the wrong way – who makes you want to forget we are all children of God – that person who just.... Argh! The one who you can't wait to see make a mistake so you can pull up a chair and a bag of popcorn and watch the show...*that* person. Oh, how hard it is to say: we grumble, but they need God's mercy, too.

And who, who will show them God's mercy? Who will celebrate when God's grace settles softly into one of those "sinners" lives? Who will help them know God's love and mercy? Who will go and leave the comfortable spaces of our own lives – those easy places from which we grumble – and go out into the world, sharing God's love with the lost ones? Will you? Will you? Will I? Will any of us?

Today we close with a poem written by Thom Shuman, a pastor at Greenhills Community Church in Cincinnati, Ohio – his own reflection on today's scripture:

lost and ?

at the bus stop  
in front of the church,  
sits an old man  
waiting for his ride  
down to the library  
    where he will spend  
    yet another day  
    searching for a friend  
    in the loneliness;

in a corner  
of the coffee shop,  
the single mother  
stretches her non-fat  
mocha grande latte  
till closing time,  
    glancing up every time  
    the door opens,  
    to see if hope  
    has walked in  
    and spotted her;

hidden in a knot of friends  
wandering the mall,  
the teenager longs  
for his parents to call,  
    simply  
    to know  
    they care.

**now,  
which of you,  
having a hundred places to be  
and a million things to do,  
would leave them  
to go after  
these lost ones?**