

God, the Sweeper

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 15:8-10

You'd need to be living in a cave to not know what happened recently in a watery cave in Thailand. As you likely know, 13 people, 12 young boys and their coach, found themselves trapped in this dark, remote, underground cave - from where they were completely unable to free themselves. After realizing what had happened, partly from the bikes and a few belongings they all had left at the mouth of the cave, officials started up an intensive search to find the lost. Drones and helicopters and people on feet swept the entire area, searching for possible ways to rescue them.

I followed those compelling news stories closely. Many of you did too. But a few days before the joyful rescue finally happened, I read something in an article that sort of pierced my heart. The article described how some of the parents who were enduring the torture of such a long, silent wait, had collapsed in the mud with exhaustion. Some had even been sent to the hospital. The article went on to share a few words from two fathers who were keeping vigil. One father said, "When I saw his bike parked inside the cave (entrance) my tears just dropped," "I was desperate to find my son." The other said, "I feel I have just lost my heart when I found his bag, mobile phone and his shoes." Hearts throughout the world were aching for what was lost at the time, to those heart-wrenched parents.

Jesus too, found stories about being lost and found compelling and important. But before we explore our text a little more, let me say that in seminary, I was taught that in every parable Jesus tells, there are always surprises. Not only that, it's almost always the surprises that carry the message of the story. And though this parable is a rather short one, it holds a number of surprises. We're going to look at those together. But first let's remember why Jesus tells these parables in the first place. Luke says that the Pharisees, the devout religious leaders were frustrated with the kind of company Jesus was keeping. They didn't like the caliber of people Jesus welcomed and ate with. And to be clear eating with someone in Jesus day was more than just eating with someone. To invite someone to eat with you was a way to honor them, to affirm their value. Sharing table fellowship was a mark of acceptance and friendship and the devout leaders could not fathom why Jesus would be doing such a thing with those they called sinners. Knowing this, Jesus tells three parables right in a row; first about a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to find just one who's lost, also about a Father waiting and watching longingly until his wayward son returns home. And tucked between the two is our story: about a lost coin and woman who won't stop sweeping until she finds it.

So here are some surprises: The first one has to do with the coin. The coin was a drachma, worth about a day's wage. The woman has only ten of them to her name. Now there are clues in the story that indicate that the woman was likely a poor, childless widow because when she gathers others to celebrate with her eventually, she summons only her neighbors and friends. Plus Luke, throughout his gospel, shows a concern for widows. Anyway, what's remarkable about Jesus using the example of a coin is that a coin can't do a thing to be found. Unlike the sheep who could at least bleat or a son who could make his way home, the lost coin can do absolutely nothing to be found. Tucked away in some dark corner or some deep crevice in the woman's home, the coin is hopelessly unable to cry out or in any way move in the direction

of being restored. Which, when you think about it, is certainly one of the points Jesus was trying to make.

Because, you see, the Pharisees were very concerned about what people did or didn't do. They liked the distinction of being righteous vs being a sinner. Now, being righteous didn't mean NOT sinning at all. It meant someone who at least tries hard to keep the law and live righteously. That's pretty much like most of us here. Like you and me – who work hard to be good Christians, to be upstanding, orderly people who try to do the right thing. But, friends, in this parable it wasn't the righteous being longingly searched for. It wasn't the ones who appeared to have their lives together and well ordered. No, it was the sinners being searched out. It was the outliers, the ones who seemed so very different from the righteous. It was those who weren't striving to keep the Jewish laws. It was those who thought, spoke, and acted differently – those who did not at all seem worthy of the same status of acceptance before God. It was those whose lives had fallen off into deep, dark, desperate places, places the righteous would be reluctant to go. These lives, these people, these were the ones being lovingly sought. This was a hard teaching for the Pharisees. If we're honest it's hard for us too.

I remember years ago reading an article in the Banner around Thanksgiving time. The author, I don't remember who it was, asked us to imagine who Jesus would have had at his Thanksgiving table. Who would Jesus invite? I think we know the kind of people Jesus would invite. I can imagine a white supremacist sitting across from a Honduran refugee or asylum seeker. And I'm sure your imagination could fill some of seats as well. Then the author said this (it's stuck with me for years): If the circle of people around your table and in your life doesn't include such people, then your circle is too small – that is, if you're striving to be like Jesus.

Dear people of God, there's an even deeper truth about that lost coin. Though you and I may seem more closely aligned with the righteous in this parable, we too, are that lost coin. You know there isn't anything inherently wrong with being righteous. Working hard, doing our best, showing up for church on time; these are all good things. But even those of us who seem to have it all together are sometimes quite lost. There are a whole lot of things in this world that can push us into a deep, dark place. Perhaps it's loneliness, or mixed up priorities. Perhaps it's the pressing need to be liked or accepted by others. Maybe it's the deep, dark place of wondering in the midst of my suffering whether God really sees me or could even begin to find me. Jesus is clear that the answer is a big, huge "yes." God, in fact, is like the woman who will not stop searching, will not stop sweeping until she has found what is so incredibly valuable to her.

Which brings up the second surprise of the story. I'm sure you've noticed. Jesus is depicting God here as a poor woman with a broom which, of course, back in the day was a rather humble, maybe even humiliating comparison. But, in fact that happens in every one of the three parables. You see the shepherd who leaves the 99 to search out one lost sheep would have been thought foolish for doing so. And the father, whose youngest son essentially wishes him dead and goes off to squander his estate, betrays all cultural norms around what it means to be the patriarch. When he sees his son off on the distance horizon he throws dignity to the wind and lifts up his robes and with all his heart he runs to welcome home the one who was lost.

Jesus isn't concerned about depicting God in these humble ways. His concern is to assure us that God will not stop sweeping and searching for those who are lost and will surely not only find us, but will gather us into a joyful community. In each of the three parables, in fact, the lost one was returned to a group. The sheep was brought back to the fold. The son was welcomed back to the family and household. The one coin was returned to the other nine. That's the way it

works with God. God finds us and gathers us into a family, into a community of people where there is joy and belonging, now and forever.

In a book I'm reading called *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, the author, Tish Harrison Warren, in speaking about Jesus gathering the church together writes, "The people of God are the losers, misfits, and broken. This is good news – and yet humiliating." She describes a fellow parishioner in her church who she imagined she would never come to like. He had slicked-back hair, polished shoes, and a subtle smell of cigarette smoke and Bengay. "The first time we met," she writes, "he said something offensive and seemed crotchety. But we kept showing up to church, and over time I saw how he served those around him and heard more of his story. He walked with a limp and had chronic pain. I began to notice he'd grin when he saw a toddler dancing in the back of the church. I grew to like him - maybe even, at times, to love him. He limped each week down the aisle to communion - a broken old man, rough around the edges, sometimes mean. And yet he was on his way [too], limping to redemption."

Friends, we, the lost, have been found by a God who is unconcerned about humbly entering into the pain and brokenness of our world and lives. And like those in the cave, who needed in the end to be rescued by others who had to get into that dark cave with them – that's how we are saved. The One who sweeps away our sins like the morning mist and sweeps every square inch of this earth to rescue sinners, goes into the darkest places for us, even the cave of death and rises to give you new life, promising to be with you wherever your path may lead.

Lastly, briefly, one final surprise I've never thought about before. If the poor widowed woman couldn't afford to live without that one coin, why would she spend her money to throw such a big party for all her friends and neighbors? Well, I think the only possible answer is this: because of the joy! Joy that overtook her. Joy that the lost had been found and gathered into the joyful community, Joy that darkness does not get the final word – grace, mercy, and love do. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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