

September 11, 2022

Year C: Proper 19 (Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 51; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10)

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My husband is car shopping. Well, truck shopping really. His beloved F150 is old, and, according to our favourite mechanic, about to fall apart. Since he's too tall and hefty to fit into most cars, he's looking at big vehicles, which these days go for outrageous prices. And, as of September 1<sup>st</sup>, there is now a 20% luxury tax on high-priced vehicles, on top of the regular taxes.

So taxes, in my house right now, are a sore point, and when I hear that reference to "*All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near ....*", I can't resist a little snarl. As Canadians we are among the most highly taxed people in the world, and we all understand why tax collectors might not be popular, although I'm sure that some tax collectors must be perfectly nice people.

In Biblical times, though, it wasn't just that taxes were very heavy, it was much worse. Taxes weren't being paid to their own government, but to the Romans; so tax collectors were collaborators working for the occupying force. That was bad enough, but they were Jews, and Jewish law forbids collecting interest, *or taxes*, from other Jews. And most taxpayers were crooks as well. Well, if you were already a universally-hated social and religious outcast, why wouldn't you put a little something in your own pocket, eh?

Perhaps tax collectors were singled out from other, run-of-the-mill sinners, because they were especially or bad, or perhaps because they were the most public, and everybody had to deal with them. The other sinners might have been just low-level, small-fry sinners like ourselves, or perhaps habitually criminal types – the pimps and prostitutes, the thieves and thugs.

Whoever they were, Jesus welcomed them and ate with them. Not because he accepted what they did, but because he accepted *them* as lost souls. Jesus was criticized for mixing with such people, because his opponents took it as evidence that he was condoning their way of life. But his message to these sinners – even the tax collectors – couldn't have been clearer: you have lost your way.

Jesus illustrated his point with three stories. We heard two of them today – the lost sheep and the lost coin. The third story was the prodigal son, and all three make the same points: first, what is lost is valuable; and second it's a good thing to try and bring it back, whether it's a sheep, a son, a coin or even a tax collector.

We've heard these stories all our lives, and we understand these two points, but, given the huge gaps of time, culture and language that separate us from when these stories were told, we don't always grasp some very significant points.

The first story starts with Jesus saying "What man among you, having a hundred sheep...?", which immediately casts the listeners in the role of shepherds. We would take that as something of a compliment, because we think of shepherds as caring and gentle people, and we all know some perfectly lovely people who are shepherds. Calling someone a shepherd in our times is a compliment.

Not so in Biblical times, and the Pharisees and scribes would not be at all flattered. Shepherds in their time and place were a rough lot: they were usually vulgar and ill-mannered; you wouldn't trust them around your valuables or your daughters, and you wouldn't believe a word they said. And because they spent their days with sheep, they were ceremonially unclean, and outcast from polite society.

It was quite an insult to suggest to the upstanding and proper religious gentlemen that they imagine themselves to be shepherds, and then Jesus followed that up with an even bigger insult: he invited them to imagine themselves as women!

It was not a random choice that made Jesus choose a shepherd and a woman in these stories. Both were characters of no social standing; both were people his critics would have ignored completely.

It was also not a random choice that it was 100 sheep and 10 coins. The shepherd has 100 sheep. A normal flock would be 20 or 30, so 100 would have been unusually big. But there's more: in ancient Hebrew, numbers had very specific meanings. The number 100 carried the idea of a complete population; 'everyone.' So the idea conveyed was that this shepherd didn't just have a lot of sheep, he had **all** the sheep.

In the same way, ten coins isn't just another nice, round number. There was a very special significance to **ten** coins. A woman was not allowed to marry without a dowry, and that dowry had to be at least ten coins. Brides would go to their weddings with ten coins strung on a band around the forehead, to prove that they had a big enough dowry. Nine coins wouldn't do it, so the tenth coin really was *that* important, and the nine were no good without it.

In the prodigal son story, the young man deliberately chose to leave his father and go off to live a dissolute life, and when he realized his mistake, he chose to go back. But in these first two stories there was no intention. The wandering sheep and the lost coin both got lost by accident. They didn't do it on purpose.

Like socks and keys and gloves, the sheep and the coin just got lost, and they would stay lost until someone found them. So these two stories are not so much about getting lost as they are about being found because someone searched. Both the shepherd and the woman needed to find what they had lost; they needed to make the flock or the dowry complete again. They were prepared to go to great trouble to find what was lost; they would keep on and on searching; and they would celebrate when they finally succeeded in bringing back what was lost.

Jesus was describing the kind of love that God has for us. When we wander off and lose ourselves, God doesn't just wait for us to find our way back to him; God comes looking for us, because we matter. The tax collectors and sinners – and us – are important enough that God will search for us; important enough for God to keep on searching; and important enough for God to rejoice over when found.

But the illustration doesn't end with us casting ourselves in the role of the lost. We also need to cast ourselves in the role of the seeker. As children of God, we are called to demonstrate that same love in searching for the 'lost' because our human family is incomplete without them, whether we are talking about people who have come adrift from the greater human family, or people who have wandered away from the smaller human families that we belong to.

We are all given people to care for – children, parents, relatives, friends – and sometimes one of them gets lost. It would sometimes be so much easier to turn our backs on them; to give up because our attempts to reach them have failed; to write them out of our lives because the pain of losing them is easier to bear than the pain of trying to reclaim them. But we don't, because love doesn't quit; it goes on trying no matter how many times it fails.

Jesus reached out to the lost souls, because love does that. He offered to help them change their lives and restore themselves, because love does that. He kept on reaching out and offering help no matter how many times they rejected him, because love does that.

As children of God, we are called to try to practice the kind of love that reaches out to the lost, especially those given to us; the kind of love that helps the lost find healing; the kind of love that doesn't quit, no matter what.

Will it be a difficult and often thank-less task? Yes it will!

Will it always work? No it won't.

Will it be so difficult that we sometimes just have to give up? Yes. Only God can manage perfect, tireless, persistent, eternal love.

But we have to try, and there will be joy in heaven, and in our souls, if even one who was lost is found and brought home.

Amen.