

Proper 19C  
Luke 15:1-10  
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood  
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### Finding us and Making us Whole

It's the 15th anniversary of 9/11. Enough time has passed that those who are just now entering high school or younger, were not alive when that event occurred.

For those of us who old enough to remember, we won't ever forget seeing those frightening images: the twin towers, the Pentagon, the crash site in a Pennsylvania field. We won't forget hearing about the loss of family, friends, and first responders. But we also saw something more than loss. In the days that followed, we also witnessed selfless giving as so many people came together to provide support, prayer, and care, helping to reaffirm that we would continue to hold on to our American way of life, in spite of the devastation.

After 15 years, we're still trying to do the hard work to figure out how to navigate that tightrope walk between keeping ourselves safe and secure, while holding on to our fundamental values of welcoming the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free — and continuing to aspire to freedom and justice for all.

We do still struggle with difficult and divisive issues — concerns about our borders, immigrants, and refugees — and concerns within our borders — inequity and injustice based on race, religion, gender, or sexuality.

We do live in a world of tension and grumbling, a steady, pulsing undercurrent that pushes us to label and divide ourselves into who's in and who's out. This is part of our human condition, and always has been, even in Jesus' time. The first thing we hear in our reading today is the grumbling of those in authority about Jesus welcoming the others, the sinners. This grumbling, this divisiveness, is a sign of the sin within our human lives.

But this human reality can actually help us to recognize our need for repentance, our need for our Lord and Savior to show us his way . . . and this recognition can help us to begin to open ourselves to receiving the good news of the Kingdom of God and find true joy.

Jesus hears the grumbling, and begins by asking a question. "Which of you, having 100 sheep and losing one, doesn't leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that's lost until he finds it?"

When I imagine myself hearing Jesus' words, I'm not raising my hand. I don't see anyone raising their hand. Who actually **would** leave the 99 on their own? All those sheep put at risk, left alone in the wilderness, simply to rescue the one. In my mind, the potential loss isn't worth the gain. I'm much more likely to let the one sheep go and just count it as a loss.

And this story gets even stranger, for there's a party afterwards to celebrate that the lost one was found. A party hosted by a shepherd, a vocation, that Jesus' listeners would have understood, was one more of those despised trades, like gamblers and tax collectors. So Jesus'

story, his vision, of a caring, loving shepherd would seem like some kind of surrealistic fiction, a yet unknown kind of world.

But Jesus is actually providing us a window into viewing the character of God, a God who delights in finding the lost and welcoming the outcast. Jesus invites us all to bear witness to the truth: that God never gives up on finding us, and there's great rejoicing when we are found.

And to make sure we get it, Jesus tells a second story. This time it's a woman who loses a coin and does everything she can to find it. I can easily imagine her careful search for the coin by lighting a lamp, sweeping her home, and diligently searching. This all makes sense.

But after she finds the coin, she too calls all her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her. It's another strange scenario, an unexpected twist. Celebration over finding one lost coin? It sounds like the party could cost more than the coin was even worth!

Jesus is giving us another chance, with this unique story's strangeness, to catch a glimpse of the mercy of God. God never gives up on finding us, and there's great rejoicing when we are found.

There's actually a third story. Although we don't read it in today's lectionary, the next passage in Luke's Gospel tells of the generous father, a story more commonly known as the Prodigal Son, where we hear of lost sons - the younger who ran off and squandered the family fortune and the elder who stayed, but holds deep resentment towards his brother and bitterness towards his father. Yet both sons are generously welcomed to a great banquet by a merciful and gracious father.

Jesus is showing us the nature of God — a God who is not like us, who does not think like us, nor act like us.

For God never gives up on the lost. And the lost who are found are not punished nor ostracized, not condemned nor shamed, but embraced and welcomed with great celebration. God's kingdom is about wholeness — about healing, love, and forgiveness — about restoring what is broken. A kingdom of hope.

Whether it's 1 lost sheep of 100, or 1 coin out of the 10, or 1 out of 2 brothers, God cares enough to stop everything and search in every corner and between every crack until the lost are found. *No one* is beyond the scope of God's care, for our Lord and Savior longs to restore wholeness within our community and within our lives.

In Jesus, we find both a glimpse of the kingdom and hope for a grumbling world. Our Lord calls us to open our hearts, so our lives can be marked by those characteristics we see embodied within the shepherd, the woman, and the generous father: love for the lost; deep caring for the well-being of others, and the gift of wholeness that can only be found by welcoming *all* of God's beloved children.

One final thought. You may have noticed that our outside sign has changed this past week. And even though we only include a few short words, we, as a community, are trying to gently tell a story to all who see it — first, that we were building to serve and now, that all are welcome.

With God's help, we can, as individuals and as a community, turn away from grumbling and focus on a life of hope, for Jesus came to restore wholeness to the world: a wholeness that is beyond the fear that separates us, a wholeness that embraces radical hospitality, a wholeness that encourages us to open our hearts and begin to live into the truth and joy of God's eternal kingdom.

*Let us pray.*

Lord, thank you for light and life, for your ever-present love towards all your beloved children. Show us your path and may your holy and life-giving Spirit move every human heart, so that the barriers which divide us may crumble, that our divisions may be healed, and we may live in justice and peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*