### “Finding the Lost” Steve Finlan for The First Church, September 11, 2022

**Psalm 51:6–10**

6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. 9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

**Luke 15:1–10**

1 Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

3 So he told them this parable: 4“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ 7Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

8 “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ 10Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

We got to hear parts of Psalm 51 three times in our service today. It is a remarkably ardent prayer for God to cleanse the psalmist inwardly, restore him in worship, and sustain him with a willing spirit. He wants to be renewed, and taught wisdom in his secret heart. He is eager to cooperate with God, and to have the right attitude. The psalmist is sincerely ready to do God’s will and to have a right spirit. It is a prayer of repentance and renewal, a theme that continues in a different way in the gospel reading.

In the gospel passage, Jesus seems to be highlighting two things: the eagerness of God to go out and rescue those who need it, and the importance of the lost individual. What is unusual about the shepherd parable? Isn’t it that the shepherd leaves the group to go and pursue the lost individual sheep who needs help? And what is weird about the lost coin story? Isn’t it the image of the woman getting down on her hands and knees to search for the coin in the dirt? These imply that the individual sheep is *needed*; the individual coin is *valuable*. The lost sheep parable draws attention to an animal who needs rescuing, who is then tenderly carried back to the flock. It draws out the kindly watchcare of the shepherd. The lost coin parable draws attention to the search itself. Imagine God getting down on his hands and knees and searching in the dust and the spiderwebs, getting grit under his fingernails! It’s sort of funny, but it makes the point.

Immediately following these parables is the story of the Prodigal Son, which develops the character of one particular lost soul, as well as the character of the hyper-generous father who welcomes back even that selfish son, and finally the character of the grumpy and disapproving older son.

These first two parables, although short and lacking any character development, have their own usefulness. They are sound-bites that show the single truth of God’s diligent care to save the individual. In both stories, Jesus shines a spotlight on the rejoicing in heaven and in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents. This is a way of highlighting the importance of the *one* sinner, and stressing the generosity of God (and the angels). The shepherd carries the sheep on his shoulders, rejoicing, and then invites his friends and neighbors to come celebrate with him.

Maybe there was also rejoicing in the early Christian community when someone came to them and said, “I would follow Jesus, too. May I be baptized?” It is a spiritual triumph when someone turns away from devotion to materialism or hedonism and decides to dedicate his life to God. We should be attuned to the joyousness of such an occasion. After all, joy is God’s main reaction to finding the lost.

These two short parables say nothing about the attitude or the behavior of the lost one. The Prodigal Son gives us a lot more in that regard, but even there, the repentance can apparently be fairly selfish. The guy thinks about how much food he had when he was at his dad’s house (Luke 15:17), and *then* he resolves to go back.

The focus is on the father’s abundant willingness to take the son back, however wayward his history may be. The father doesn’t seem to care what trouble the prodigal got into. It’s the self-righteous older brother who is scandalized by what the prodigal has been getting up to. The father has nothing but open invitation, even toward the smug, older brother. I think there have been times in my life when I’ve been the needy and foolish younger brother, and other times I have been the arrogant and entitled older brother. Maybe you see yourself as one or the other at times, too. Obviously this is the richest of the three parables, but not our main focus for today.

The other two parables say nothing about the behavior of the sheep or the coin. The sheep might not even be *aware* that it is lost! The focus is not on the target of rescue, or on *how* they became lost, but on the generosity and care of the rescuer. People can understand the concern of a shepherd to not lose any of his sheep, or of a woman to find a coin if she lost it. We show that kind of concern, too, over our possessions. Of course God doesn’t need money or sheep. But it is a good symbol of how diligently God sets out to find anyone who is lost. Can we follow God’s example, and extend our kindness and thoughtful generosity to others?

Karen knew a mom in Jamestown who had an energetic three-year-old boy who had a tendency to wander from the back yard into the large forest at the back of their property. Sometimes she would search for *hours* to find him. One time she even had to call her husband home from work and enlist the neighbors to walk through the woods calling his name. He was not yet verbal, so he didn’t respond to their calls. After this incident, she put bells on his shoes so she could hear him whenever she had to search for him. Now *that’s* a diligent and thoughtful parent.

The three parables seem to say that any way that you are found by God is good. You might be a clueless, lost sheep, a coin that has dropped in the dirt, or a selfish young lad who just wants to get back to his dad’s home. God will take you back, no matter what shape you’re in. Then you need to straighten up, of course. And we can use Psalm 51 to get a picture of what that looks like. The right attitude is pure honesty and simplicity, seeking to do God’s will. Such a loyal child will not let himself get lost again. If he has doubts or questions, he will take them to the Lord in prayer, and will not become thoughtless or careless. If he has trials and temptations he will talk about them in time of prayer. So: take thought. Have a care. Share your concerns or your doubts with God, if you have any. And most of all—trust that God *wants* you, and will set out to *find* you.