5. The Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin  
(Luke 15: 1-10)

Many of the parables we’ve read have described the Kingdom of Heaven itself, but sometimes they describe God. We learn that God is always planting seeds to help grow love and faith inside of us, and that He is like a man who invites you to a great feast, or like a vineyard owner who pays all His laborers the same and hopes that you’ll invite Him in to share the first fruits of the great gifts He’s given you. Jesus uses the parables to help you understand who God is, and what your relationship with God might look like.

*The Parable of the Lost Sheep and* The Parable of the Lost Coin *help us to understand God’s motivations, and how He feels about us.*

In the gospel written by St. Luke, we read that one day Jesus was teaching,

Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, “This Man receives sinners and eats with them.”

(Luke 15: 1-2)

Tax collectors were known for being pretty awful, so when all the tax collectors and sinners gathered around to listen to Jesus, the Pharisees and scribes -- who were the people in charge of the Temple -- were horrified. They thought that it was really bad to sit with sinners; they thought it was unclean, or that it would be sinful to sit with sinners. But Jesus was happy to sit with them, and the Pharisees and scribes were scandalized.

It was difficult for the Pharisees and scribes to understand why Jesus would want to sit with sinners. As we know, Jesus often taught people by using a simple story with a deeper meaning, so you may not be surprised to hear that Jesus answered them with a parable. Luke continues,

So He spoke this parable to them, saying: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’

I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.

(Luke 15: 3-7)
The Scriptures talk very much about the people of God as sheep, and God as our shepherd. The people of Biblical times lived in a culture where raising sheep was an important business, and many people worked as shepherds, tending to their flocks. They traveled with their sheep from field to field, taking them to find good grass to graze on, and they protected the sheep from danger. When Jesus talks about sheep and a shepherd, His audience understands that a shepherd loves his sheep and does all that he can to protect them, and they also understand that God is their shepherd, watching over them.

When the Pharisees and scribes are scandalized that Jesus eats with the sinners, He reminds them of this image: He is the shepherd, and the people are His sheep. The Pharisees have forgotten that the tax collectors and the sinners are still people. They think of them as completely lost, and assume that they could never be made good again. Jesus, on the other hand, sees that they are lost, and like a good shepherd, He runs to go find them and bring them back! When He finds that one beloved human being is wandering off lost, has left the Kingdom and is headed off somewhere else, He tries to bring him back! Jesus loves every single human being, no matter how sinful or awful they might be, and He will always do whatever He can to bring us back to Him. Isn’t it wonderful to know that you are so important to Jesus that He will always come for you and try to bring you back home?

This parable is not only for certain people, like tax collectors, who sin a lot and wander away from the faith. It’s really about all of us human beings! The Holy Fathers suggest that we think about the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve ate the forbidden apple, when we look at this parable. St. Gregory the Great said,

“Since a hundred is a perfect number, He possessed a hundred sheep when He created angels and men. But soon after one was lost, when man through sin forsook the pastures of true life.”

When God created this world, and the Garden, Paradise, to be a perfect home for human beings, He created many things: the heavens and the earth, and all of the people and all of the angels too! But when people decided to follow their own desires instead of following God, and ate the forbidden fruit so that they had to leave Paradise, they were like the sheep that left and got lost. All of us humans, who have left Paradise and are wandering around this world, are God’s lost sheep, and He wants to bring us home to Paradise, to the Kingdom of God.

Right after that, Jesus tells another parable. He says,

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!’

Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

(Luke 15: 8-10)
Of course, everyone listening to Jesus teaching knows that money is an important thing: when people lose money, they usually try to find it! This lady lights a lamp and sweeps the house, looking in every nook and cranny of her house, to find the valuable lost dollar. Jesus does the same for us: when we go missing, He seeks everywhere to find us!

You may have noticed the numbers in this story: the shepherd has 100 sheep, and the lady has 10 coins. When the shepherd loses one he still has 99 sheep left, and yet he doesn’t say, “Oh well! I still have a lot of sheep!” He loves every single one of his sheep, so he heads out to find the one who is missing! The lady is the same way -- she doesn’t say, “Good thing I still have nine other coins!” She wants all of her coins, so she works hard, cleaning her house and searching everywhere to find it. This is how Jesus is! He doesn’t say, there are so many nice people coming to church and praying, that’s probably enough! He loves each and every person He created, and He thinks every single person is worth going after! He loves you very much.

Both of these parables end the same way: with joy! The shepherd calls to “his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’” He is so excited to have his one sheep back with the others, protected as part of his beloved flock. He invites the other people: the community shares in the joy of the sheep’s return!

But it’s not just the shepherd and his friends who are rejoicing. In both stories, Jesus tells us that there is rejoicing in heaven; the angels themselves rejoice whenever a sinner comes home. Guardian angels are assigned to people to help them along the path to heaven, and all of the angels are rooting for us. Whenever a human being comes into the Kingdom of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and all of the thousands of angels rejoice. Every single person matters.

What’s more, Jesus says that there is MORE rejoicing when a sinner returns! He answers the Pharisees and scribes who can’t understand why he sits with the tax collectors and sinners: God didn’t stop loving them just because they’re doing awful things. He’s also answering all of us. Sometimes we wonder if we could do something so bad that God wouldn’t love us anymore. Jesus is not just saying that God continues to love you no matter what, He is saying that heaven rejoices even more when someone who has been behaving badly repents, and turns back to God! You are beloved by God, and so are all the sinners around you, and God doesn’t want to punish you or get rid of you; He only wants you to come and be with Him in the Kingdom.

Journey Through The Parables by Tending the Garden of Our Hearts can be found on Ancient Faith Radio and at tending-the-garden.com
QUESTIONS:

Why did Jesus tell these two parables? Who needed to hear them?

- Jesus was hanging out with tax collectors and other sinners, who wanted to hear Him. The Pharisees and scribes thought this was awful, and that Jesus was sinning by just being near those people. The Pharisees and scribes needed to hear the parables, but so do we!

What does Jesus want His listeners to understand when He tells the parable of the Lost Sheep?

- When Jesus talks about sheep and a shepherd, His audience understands that a shepherd loves his sheep and does all that he can to protect them. This helps whoever hears the parable to understand that God is their shepherd, watching over them, and always coming to find them.

How hard does the woman in the parable of the Lost Coin look for her coin?

- She does everything she can to find that coin! She lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until she finds it! And when she does, she has a party to celebrate!

FOR DISCUSSION:

Have you ever felt lost, like the sheep or the coin? Maybe you really WERE lost, like in a store or at a playground; or maybe you just had a lost feeling inside of you. How did God find you when you felt lost? Did He send someone else to help you? Tell about that time, if you feel comfortable doing so.

Now think about a time when you lost something. Did you go and look for it, like the shepherd and the woman did? Did you find it? How did you feel when you found it? Tell about the thing that you lost, how you found it, and how you felt when you found it. Now you know how God feels when He is reunited with you!

In the Orthodox Church, God gives us a beautiful sacrament to bring us back to be closer to Him. When we are feeling lost and far away from Him, we can go to Confession and ask His forgiveness for all the ways in which we’ve stepped away from Him. God forgives us! This brings us closer to God again, and brings Him (and us!) great joy. Have you ever gone to confession? Remember this sacrament when you are feeling lost and far away from God.

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