

Pentecost 17/Proper 19. September 15, 2013. Nigel Taber-Hamilton: The lost sheep & coin

Two stories in today's gospel, one of which is so familiar. Do I have to tell you that Jesus wasn't really talking of sheep and coins?! That's a caution to remember as we explore what both are about! The parable of the Lost Sheep is one I remember from my childhood. In fact, thanks to St. John, who in his gospel writing blends this parable together with Jesus' statement that "I am the Good Shepherd", we've come to associate the shepherd who goes out to seek the lost sheep with Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep. The result, among other things, is a great number of stained glass windows of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, carrying a sheep on his shoulders. This is a comforting pastoral image which is rooted in our understanding of our faith. Of course, it's likely that very few of us have ever even seen a shepherd up close, but the image is so self-explanatory, so deeply rooted in our culture, that it almost doesn't matter. It's a familiar, friendly, and attractive picture of what God's love is like, and on that level it requires little explanation.

The parable of the lost coin isn't quite as memorable – perhaps because a coin is not a living, breathing creature; that's why I think the "lost sheep" parable draws us in, because human instinct is to protect the helpless in the face of predators. That's why, I'm sure, GM took this parable and is re-telling it as a "lost calf" parable –the message is designed to make you feel good about GM trucks, of course, but it underscores the power of the original parable.

But the 21st Century message we get from the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin parables is incomplete. So let's take a look at them both:

Firstly, it would be obvious to Jesus' listeners that the shepherd and the woman weren't wealthy. Wealthy sheep owners hired shepherds to care for their sheep. This shepherd couldn't afford to hire someone else. And the woman was almost certainly looking for a coin from her head-dress, which would have been a wedding gift. To lose a coin would have been embarrassing, but who would notice if you had hundreds? On the other hand, if you only had ten it would be obvious. No wonder the woman searched desperately for it!

It's easy for us to understand why the shepherd and the woman are so driven to find that which is lost under these circumstances. But there's a more significant reason why Jesus tells this story, and it lies in the numbers: 100, and 10. Jews loved numbers! If you read the OT with that in mind you'll see numbers showing up everywhere! New Testament too: Luke in particular, but the Revelation of John (4, 144,000; 12, 666). We don't always notice them because we've embraced them into our own culture.

Luke is into numbers in spades! For his contemporaries the number 10 and multiples of it were particularly important. If you add together the first four numbers– 1, 2, 3, and 4 – you get 10. Because of this the number 10 came to represent unity and wholeness, the bringing together of things of different value to form something complete. So when Luke's audience hear Jesus tell a story where a group of 100 sheep - ten times ten - unity times unity – was in danger of being broken up, they would of course appreciate the importance of locating the one sheep without whom the flock lacked that completeness and unity that came with being 100. The perfection and completeness of the 10 has been disrupted, and in order to restore the unity it's imperative that

the lost sheep – and the lost coin – must be located.

I don't know if I now have your undivided attention, but I'm prepared to bet good money that Jesus had his listeners' full and undivided attention. This was "edge of the seat" stuff!! The loss of a sheep might be bad for that sheep, and obviously it was bad for the shepherd. *What we miss, because we don't understand the numbers, is that it's also bad for the other 99 sheep. They stop being whole. I think we know this for ourselves, too.* We seek the lost from our communities not only because we want to find them but also because we are diminished as a community without them.

The poet John Donne famously put it this way: "No man is an island, entire of itself; Every man is a piece of the continent...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee".

The experience of being lost – in the more profound meaning of that word – is a familiar one for pretty much all of us at some time or another in our lives. That "lostness" can be emotional, spiritual, or physical – it can literally be lost to ourselves or to others, physical isolation as well as emotional distancing.

That lostness is at its most painful when it has to do with being lost from those we cherish. Relationship – or the lack thereof – is at the heart . We've all wandered off, maybe only a few steps, maybe great distances, from a relationship, be it with spouse, family, friends church, or God. Sometimes we remain lost from those we have at one time or another held and cherished. Sometimes we've seen others wander off in the same way.

When we find ourselves in that place of lostness, or know that others are there, then there is, I believe, a divine imperative to seek, to search, for that place where the unity that we've lost is restored, a unity that's at the heart of God. If these two parables call us to do anything it's this: to seek out the ones who are lost and broken and invite them back into wholeness and unity – and to do the same for ourselves.

It seems to me that this is a significant part of our life's work – that we struggle all our lives with the tensions that come from being out of one sort of relationship or another, being outside of some community.

I've never found it easy – and it sometimes sounds hollow (but not always!) to say that nothing that is worthwhile really is easy. So I take heart in the core of Jesus' message in these parables, that those who seek that unity and wholeness will be blessed – that the quest can (and, with God, will) end in joy. The shepherd goes forth in search of the lost sheep, the woman seeks for the lost coin, and they both find that for which they seek, their stories end in joy and celebration.

He was talking about us and those others we love, me and you. And the joy and celebration he talks of tell us much about the reign of God. They tell us that we are cause for celebration in heaven, as we all seek for that unity and completeness that is God. AMEN.

