

**Start Sweeping.**

**Luke 15:1-10**

**Home Moravian Church, September 14, 2025**

Another day in Luke's gospel, another complaint from the Pharisees and the scribes. They have been challenging Jesus since chapter five, when Jesus told a paralyzed man his sins were forgiven. A few verses later, Jesus called a tax collector, Levi, to follow him. Levi not only followed, he threw a banquet in his home to celebrate. The dinner guests included Levi's co-workers—"a large crowd of tax collectors" (5:29), right there at the table. The Pharisees and the scribes asked Jesus' disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" It was not a disciple, but Jesus, who answered: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance" (5:31-32).

Then on Luke's gospel goes: page after page of lessons, arguments, parables, along with healings, exorcisms, miracles, and the feeding of thousands on a couple of fish and a little bread. Now, today, we're in chapter fifteen, and the Pharisees and scribes are grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Really? TEN chapters—chapters in which the Pharisees have not only heard astonishing lessons, witnessed amazing acts, but actually dined with Jesus themselves, in their own homes—and still they are stuck on *this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them?*

Jesus is more patient than I would be (of course). He offers a parable—or two. In some ways, he responds to the same complaint with the same answer: In the kingdom of God, people on the outside are welcomed in. If the Pharisees don't get that from chapter five's metaphor of illness—the sick who need physicians—maybe these new metaphors, emphasizing loss—a lost

sheep, a lost coin—will capture their imaginations and turn their hearts. Maybe they can imagine what it is to be that lost sheep, so far from the fold. Feel what it is to be the coin, lost in a corner.

The metaphor certainly works for us. We *get* being lost sheep. We have absorbed the basic Christian theology that it is in humanity's fallen nature to stray from God's path, and each of us knows personally that moment of looking around and discovering we are hopelessly lost.

Recently I was talking to a dear friend whose son, a man of great gifts including the gift of faith, died an early death by alcohol, which sank its teeth into him in his teenage years. Smiling sadly, my friend said, "I think of him as a lost sheep."

The metaphor lives for each of us. We rejoice: The good shepherd searches until he can carry us home on his shoulders! We take comfort in our conviction that God always finds us. It's right here in these parables.

But how could God lose us in the first place? Does the good shepherd ever lose sight of even one member of the herd? Do God's fingers hold the coins so carelessly that one could fall to the floor and roll away? Is that the lesson that Jesus intended for the Pharisees, or for us?

What *did* Jesus want the Pharisees to hear? They made the same complaint: Jesus eats with sinners. These parables suggest the same response: In the kingdom of God, those on the outside are welcomed in. But between the same complaint and the same response, something is different.

What's the difference between chapter five's sick patient who needs healing and chapter fifteen's lost sheep and coin that need finding? Well: Sick patients need healing for their own sake; lost sheep and coins need finding for the owner's sake. The sheep and the coin belong to someone, who will be poorer if the lost is never found.

If Jesus hasn't gotten through to the Pharisees so far, maybe it's because the Pharisees can't imagine being sick or hungry. Maybe they can't identify with the people Jesus has healed, the people he's fed, the people he's freed. But with these two parables in Luke, Jesus invites the Pharisees to identify with characters of some means. Not with shepherds, of course (a lowly position), and certainly not with women (worse); but to identify with the owner of some measure of wealth, well, for a Pharisee that's probably not a stretch. In fact, Jesus seems to assume they will identify with those characters to the point where their choices will be obvious. See if you can hear that assumption in Jesus' words:

*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?*

*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?*

Recently, through a community organizing effort, I've had the privilege of some training in negotiation. One thing I've learned is that in a negotiation, you have to appeal to the other side's self-interest. When they hear their self-interest, that's when they start listening.

Jesus understands the self-interest of the Pharisees, and indeed, of anyone who has ever lost something of value. Imagine owning 100 sheep, or 10 coins, and losing one. Who among you—he asks—would not search for what is lost? The self-interested response to a loss is to go looking.

Because I don't believe God would lose a sheep or a coin, I'm forced to consider that the shepherd or the woman might not represent God. It's an easy habit, assuming that the main character in a parable is God, but what if they're not? What lesson might we learn if we posit that neither the shepherd losing a sheep, nor the woman losing a coin, represents God; that, instead,

that shepherd or woman represents nothing but your everyday, actual man or woman who loses things all the time? Have you ever lost something of value? A piece of jewelry? A vital document? A friend? Did you go looking till the lost was found?

If that's what an ordinary human would do, what about a *bunch* of ordinary humans together? What about, say, a church congregation? I don't think that God loses any of us, but I do think that sometimes we might lose each other. And, like the shepherd who loses a sheep, or the woman who loses a coin, we are the poorer for the loss.

Every member of a congregation enriches the community—and I am *not* talking about financial contributions. I'm talking about personalities, spiritual gifts, energy, ideas, stories, quirks, questions, arguments, even needs. I'm not talking about the coin each person gives, but the coin each person represents, enriching our lives with their own. Have we ever let a coin slip carelessly through our fingers? Did we notice it was missing, and if so, how many corners were we willing to sweep until we found it?

You may have heard in that paragraph an appeal to a congregation's self-interest. But as I have learned in those trainings I talked about, self-interest doesn't always mean selfishness. Especially when what interests you interests God: for example, a community that welcomes outsiders in.

I think of my friend's son, who grew up in church congregations but died a lost sheep. How might the lives of those congregations been enriched by his presence, had they swept enough corners? Imagine the rejoicing when they found him! How much would that party have felt like the inbreaking of God's kingdom?

Let me say: Not all who wander are lost. Everyone in this world is on a journey, and the people in our lives, and in church congregations, make deliberate choices with all kinds of

reasons for leaving one place and heading for another. People who have held membership in this congregation might choose a new community, or they might be on a journey through a variety of faith experiences until they find the place that feels most like home to them. There is great rejoicing in heaven anytime a person finds a home.

But there are also people with whom we say we've "lost touch." We've failed to notice their absence, or, if we noticed, we've failed to reach out, to follow through. We've lost touch. Someone who loses their sense of touch might let a lot of coins slip through their fingers. God didn't lose those coins; we did. And we are the poorer for it.

Ten years ago, we received into membership a talented and engaging poet, Dr. Anthony Butts. Originally from Detroit, Dr. Butts was a professor of creative writing at Carnegie-Mellon until his diagnosed schizophrenia made his position untenable and all his paths uncertain. In his wanderings, he wound up here.

Dr. Butts's presence enriched our community. We learned about mental illness and what it means to walk with someone through hard places, including street corners, hospitals and jail. We learned to rejoice when a suffering person enjoys a period of stability, without expecting stability forever. I remember one day, we had breakfast at Bojangles—I paid—and later that day, another Home Church member bought me lunch at Forsyth Country Club. I felt so blessed by the diversity of our congregation.

A few years ago, Dr. Butts returned to Detroit. And we lost touch. I sometimes tried to find him on Facebook. I had kept on file a couple of names of his family members, but I never tried to find their phone numbers. I guess I was reluctant to get involved.

A couple of weeks ago, I had a sudden inspiration to Google "Anthony Butts obituary." And there it was. Anthony died in Detroit in April 2023, at the age of 53. I've been thinking of

him ever since. Anthony so greatly enriched our community while he was here; and after he left, thought I sometimes looked for him, I can't say I swept the corners. I can only say, I feel impoverished by the loss.

If we have always read today's two parables from the perspective of the lost, let's read them today from a different perspective: the perspective of a community with something to lose. Or even a nation with something to lose.

On Wednesday, our nation witnessed another horrific episode of violence, the assassination of a public figure. A suspect, a very young man, has been arrested, and everyone with a platform—which is, in our Internet era, simply *everyone*—is arguing about his motive, trying to determine from which political side the bullets were fired.

I think the so-called sides matter less than the whole landscape: a landscape of anger, of suspicion, of destruction, into which an unhappy, easily influenced, and possibly ill young man wandered and got lost. I'm sure those who loved him sought for him; but for whatever reason, they couldn't get him back. A family, a school, a community, and today, a nation are all deeply impoverished because that sheep got lost, that coin slipped through someone's fingers.

We all know what it is to be the lost sheep, the lost coin. But today, let's hear Jesus calling us to be the shepherd whose livelihood depends on finding the sheep; the woman whose household is impoverished by the loss of a coin. Jesus calls us to light the lamp and get out the broom. Let's start sweeping. Amen.