The Rev. Eugene LeCouteur
Emmanuel Episcopal Church
Middleburg, Virginia

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
8:00 a.m. & 10:30 a.m.
September 14, 2025

"Making it Whole"

A lost sheep and a lost coin. Two different things, one is living, but the other is inanimate. The sheep got lost while the coin was lost; we don't know how. The only aspect they share is their lostness.

What does it mean to be lost? The dictionary tells us someone who is lost does not know their whereabouts, like the sheep in the parable. A thing can be lost, which means it is misplaced; we do not know its location. However, lost has other meanings that have nothing to do with location. What other kinds of lostness are there? [Listen for not recoverable, such as lost youth, someone who has died, someone who has lost their ethical or moral way…] What does that last one mean to you? Be more specific. Someone who has lost their way has what? They have lost their moral bearing, or they have gone off the acceptable path in life. What sort of person does that bring to mind? Could it be they are a criminal, or a substance abuser, they dabble in the underworld, or live in the metaphorical dark areas or alleyways of life? They are not in the bright light of day. They are sneaky, underhanded, perverse, devious, or shifty to name a few adjectives.

If you drew a picture of such a person, what would they look like? How would their eyes be? How about their smiles? How about their clothing? Would their features be soft and gentle? Would they be clean-cut or a little shabby or garish in appearance? Where do you think they come from? That is did they grow up in a healthy, happy home or on the wrong side of the tracks? Maybe they had bad homes or no homes. Perhaps their parents or caregivers were shifty, sneaky, underhanded, perverse, or devious. That might excuse some of their behavior because they did not have a chance to do better. Whatever we may think of these lost people, the one thing they have in common is that they are in some way outside what we consider an acceptable society.

There is nothing in the parable that suggests that we are to see the lost sheep or coin as an outsider. The sheep might have done something to get lost, such as wandering after a nice patch of grass. That does not make the sheep a bad actor, sneaky, shifty, or devious. The sheep might be foolish, careless, or naïve, but not necessarily bad. In contrast, a coin cannot commit an offense. It is inanimate. The woman may have lost it, but the coin did nothing wrong.

Additionally, the sheep is part of a flock of one hundred sheep, and the coin is part of a set of ten. Not only are they not bad actors and not outsiders, but they are part of a group. Without them, the group is not whole. That is why when they are recovered, everyone celebrates. Note that there is no recrimination, punishment, or scolding of the sheep nor of whoever lost the coin. All is good.

Why then do so many interpreters of this passage assume that this is about people who are lost and outside of the norm? Let's look at the construction of the passage. There are three parts. There is a setup where Pharisees and scribes grumble because they say, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." The second part is Jesus telling a parable in response to their grumbling. The third part is Jesus speaking directly and plainly to the Pharisees and scribes. This third part is Luke talking. He likes to have Jesus explain everything, something that Jesus does not do in the other gospels. Jesus usually prefers to speak obliquely through parables.

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Here, Jesus is speaking more broadly, not just about sinners. He is saying that we, even the lost and sinners, are part of the group of the children of God. We all get lost sometimes through our own fault or by accident. Being lost is not reserved for those we consider bad. Even Pharisees and scribes get lost. Even people of faith get lost. Despite getting lost, we still belong. When we realize someone is lost, our job is to seek them out. When we find that person instead of berating them for getting lost, Jesus says we are to celebrate them.

Of course, that is counterintuitive. I remember when I was a teenager, and I had just received my driver's license. That evening, I wanted to see a friend off who was moving away. We got pizza and played mini golf, but we lost track of time. When I pulled into the driveway at home, I was met by my father, with my mother and siblings standing in the doorway. They had been worried that I was in a car accident. They did not celebrate my safety. I was chewed out for showing up late. Our anxiety is released with anger instead of relief.

Jesus' parables almost always suggest a counterintuitive response. The good guys aren't the priest and scribe but the Samaritan, an outsider.[1] We don't pull up the weeds but let them grow alongside the wheat.[2] We celebrate the prodigal son,[3] and so on. Jesus is showing us that the Kingdom of God is different from what we consider normal.

Mercy and forgiveness are the norms. Love and compassion are the central emotions. Punishment, hardheartedness, retribution, and revenge, while they might be natural responses, are to be tamed in favor of peace, joy, and love. It is not that we push down those negative thoughts and feelings, but we teach ourselves a different way of responding than the world has taught us.

That is what the shepherd and the woman do. Note that these are unexceptional people who set the example. They are not wealthy, scholarly, saintly, or angelic. They are everyday people who seek out the lost with the purpose of returning them to the group. What is lost belonged in the group to begin with. When they are separated, we must reunite them with the group. Of course, their return will be celebrated.

Let's remember that none of us is perfect. None of us is without fault. We all get lost sometimes. Instead of condemning others when they get lost, we are to seek them out and bring them back to the fold. We are to bring them back home. When we do, we are to rejoice because what was lost is found. Now what was diminished is whole again. That is worth a great celebration. And joyful shouts of "Thanks be to God."

[1] Luke 10:25-37
[2] Matthew 13:24-30
[3] Luke 15:11-32

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