

Lord, make these words Your Word, that our hearts may become Your heart. Amen.

Are you the 99, or are you the one? Do you stay with the 9 coins safely gathered in a pocket – or have you gone rolling under the bed?
Are you among the 99 sheep peacefully grazing on the hillside – or have you been known to wander in search of greener pastures?

What sense does this story make, anyway?

Is it sensible to leave 99 sheep unattended in the wilderness to go chasing after one silly sheep who doesn't have the sense to stay put?

Who may already be dead, fallen in a ravine or snatched by a predator?

Is it sensible to allocate precious resources to helping someone out of addiction, knowing how great the chance of relapse is? Or someone who keeps ending up in destructive relationships or engaging in self-harming behaviors?

Ah, but Jesus is talking about what makes sense, but about how things work in the realm of God. He makes it clear that in his world, you leave the 99 you don't have to worry about, who can and should look after each other, and you go, you search until you find that one that has become separated from the flock, who is alone and scared and in danger, because often you look up from chasing greener pastures to find yourself in cold, dark, woods.

I read somewhere that sheep who have become separated from their flocks tend to just lie down helplessly – they don't stand or walk or run anywhere. When the shepherd who has risked a lot to find this sheep, finds him, she carries him home on her shoulders, rejoicing.

All the action in these two parables is with the one who seeks and finds; the sheep and the coin don't do anything to be found.

It isn't we who go looking for God and find God; God goes looking for us and finds us where we are, as we allow ourselves to be found.

Jesus is telling a story about extravagant love – the extravagant love of God who sent his only Son into the world to find the lost and bring us back into the fold.

Does it make sense, what Jesus did? To lay down his infinite God-ness and consent to be bound in a body, in space, in time, and then to suffer and die for, by and large, a pretty ungrateful humanity?

I wonder... but that is the kind of God we worship.

The picture of God which Jesus reveals is different from what the writers of Exodus paint; Jesus reveals God as a one who seeks that which is lost, because we are precious, valuable, worthy of being sought and recovered, worthy of celebrating when it is restored once more;
a God who spares nothing to find his children when they are lost.
a God with profligate love – overabundant, overwhelming, over-the-top, wasteful, inconvenient, what-are-you-thinking love, love like a woman who finds and holds what is precious, love like a shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep;
a God who holds each one of us precious, infinitely precious.

And the love doesn't stop there – Jesus says that this shepherd,
...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.'
This rejoicing is not a solo act – it is what the community, the flock is called to, Jesus makes it really clear – if you thought we were talking about sheep or coins – we're not. We're talking about sinners and saints, sinners who repent and saints who rejoice.

So which are you? Do you feel more like the lost sheep or one of the 99 who get less attention because they're already okay? I usually feel like the 99. The 99 are no less sinful than the wandering ones – but our sin can be harder to spot: judgmentalism, self-righteousness, greed, legalism, pride, arrogance. Jesus Christ did come into the world to save sinners, and that he has found each and every one of us. Some of us hide-and-seek harder than others, but it's not like God ever has any doubts about where we were. Will we let ourselves be found? Sometimes life begins when we lay down and allow ourselves to be overtaken by the One who is all-Good, all-Powerful, all-Loving. Taking that first step in A.A. – acknowledging that we are powerless and asking God to take over. People in 12-step programs know what it's like to be picked up and carried on the shoulders of the shepherd. And they know what it's like to celebrate the sheep who returns. The life Jesus calls us to is more often manifest in 12-step meetings in our parish halls than in our sanctuaries.

It doesn't actually matter whether we see ourselves as the one or the 99, the sheep who went astray, or the good sheep: because we're both. We are always, at one and the same time, fallen and redeemed, saints and sinners, and will be as long as we are in this life.

What matters for this community of sinner-saints is how we can join in the rejoicing as each lost sheep is brought into the fold, not sitting in judgment but embracing in love, even the hardest to love. Even more – can we join the shepherd in seeking out those who have gotten lost in our lives... gotten lost in materialism or greed, or gotten lost in cynicism, or gotten lost in television or the internet – or gotten lost in good old-fashioned ways like drinking, drugs, crime, pornography?

When Jesus told this story, “lost” referred to obvious sinners – the tax collectors, harlots and lowlifes he often broke bread with – and healed. We can redefine “lost” to include people who struggle not only with addiction but with all categories of mental illness, who are manifesting the toxicity in our society that affects all of us. The “lost sheep” we are to seek are those about to fall to their deaths or be snatched away by a predator.

They include people caught up in the epidemic of suicide in our time, and those struggling mightily not to succumb to the desire to end their lives because they find life very, very painful; the increasing numbers of veterans and police officers dying by suicide. the young people aged 15-24 for whom suicide is now the 2nd leading cause of death – it’s 4th for adults 18-65. I lost a sister to suicide, and seen the ripples of pain it causes in many families . These are the sheep to which we are being sent, my friends.

Who do you know, who may not realize how precious he or she is to God?
Who needs to be reminded of grace and forgiveness?
Maybe you’re the one God is asking to find that person, carry that news.
What would it be like to live always ready, always on the look-out, to bring hope and love and grace to people who are going under? To remind them that there is nothing we can do or think or say that God cannot forgive?

When we live like that, what blessing we get! We get to join a really great party! Because we’re meant to be reconciled. Life with the 99 when the one comes back – there’s a joy that absorbs all the anger and judgment and fear of losing. There’s a shout of Hallelujah! And singing and dancing and praising because what’s lost has been found, what was broken has been fixed, what was missing has been restored, what was partial has become whole. *There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.* And the party’s already started. Christ, our Passover is sacrificed for us: **Therefore let us keep the feast! Alleluia! Amen.**

Luke 15:1-10

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And 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.' Just so, I tell you, **there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.**

"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? When 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.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."