

When Jesus makes the leap from speaking of lost sheep to a lost soul in need of repentance, he's pretty much got us all pegged. It's *all* of us. *You* may count yourself among the sinless righteous – like the grumbling Pharisees and scribes mentioned in today's gospel – but the underlying message to those grumblers who become more irked as the result of Jesus' little parable (let alone his association with his unsavory dining partners) is Jesus' intimation and "pastoral indictment" that *they* are the ones who are lost.

In fact – Jesus' parable is meant to teach us — there are only two kinds of sheep: those who know when they're lost, and those who don't know it when they're lost. The Pharisees and scribes – despite their religiosity – didn't know they were lost. More so, in the eyes of the early Christian community of believers in the divine presence of the Christ, they didn't know *what* they'd lost.

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So the second parable Jesus tells us this morning extends the wonderfully-peculiar gospel message. Instead of one hundred sheep and only one loser that wanders off on their own accord, there's a woman with ten pieces of silver who misplaces one of them of own accord. This time it's not some loser sheep who wanders off and gets themselves lost; but rather one who has a small fortune and through their own reckless actions loses ten percent of their assets.

Now, a 10% economic loss may not represent cause for concern to some folks, though I don't know many of them myself. But looked at another way, I *do* know anyone who tithes 10% of whatever they've got in return-offering to the Lord doesn't consider it chicken feed. And that kind of comparison is something even the Pharisees and scribes would have been able to relate to, considering the fact they may well have observed the biblical tithe.

Thus, the Pharisees and scribes may far more easily have understood the *truly rhetorical* nature of Jesus' second question, "*Who wouldn't?*" What loser wouldn't turn your house upside down in search of one-tenth of your fortune? In this instance, the recklessness *precedes* the result of one's reckless actions, but the consequence is still loss.

So, with the lost sheep story, if you had your head about you you'd write off the loss. But in the second story, you'd move heaven and earth to find the lost treasure, if you had your head about you. In either case, *loss* is the common factor.

In the first instance, everyone – whether they realize it, or are ever willing to admit it — get lost. In the second instance, every loser loses something – and a significant portion of that which is of value to you.

In the first case, you may like to think of the lost sheep is as an exception to the rule; unless, of course, *you're* the lost sheep this time. In the second, you may like to console yourself over your ineptitude and a self-inflicted loss by explaining it away as a "mysterious disappearance." But in both instances, Jesus would gently remind us with a couple of simple little parables: Who are we kidding?

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Last Thursday evening at Saint John's we held a silent vigil to honor and mourn the loss of the first 1,000 US soldiers in our war in Iraq. The sanctuary was nearly full. Almost three-quarters of those in attendance were members of our surrounding community, who had heard of the event, which I had hastily put together with only 24-hours notice. What was it all about?

One thousand soldiers in Iraq, of course, are not the only ones we have lost. Over seven thousand U.S. military personnel have lost limbs, or former health, or their psyches that will be haunted by a legacy of post-traumatic stress syndrome. The Secretary of Defense, other government officials and military leaders consider these numbers to be "relatively modest losses." Like one out of a hundred sheep, it is explained in their own words and actions as the regrettable, but inevitable, cost of war.

Yet perhaps these minor losses aren't so insignificant when one considers the additional totality of loss – just to date – of the death, injury and destruction of Iraqi civilians, other coalition forces, and even the enemy combatants. And then there are *our own* losses in all this. All tolled it seems as if truly there is no one who has not suffered loss. All tolled, almost everyone seems to be losers. The only difference may be in those who know this and acknowledge it; and those who don't. And the losses, to date, can hardly be explained away in illusory fashion – like misplace watch or a sparkling diamond ring – as a "mysterious disappearance." We are sheep of the one fold, and are lost.

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Jesus the Christ, the good shepherd of the sheep and the Lord of our life, puts before us a reckless, divine truth that should be good news to all who are lost and seeking true peace: Do not be content to play it safe with the ninety who believe they do not need to repent our truly lost and wandering ways. Rather, recklessly seek out the one who is lost. Seek out all the ones who are lost. For surely, in seeking, we will truly find each other and our own true selves.

Then gather friends and neighbors to rejoice over the consequences of your reckless gospel choice. And join, as well, the rejoicing hosts of heaven.

Amen. *jb+*

# MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OR A RECKLESS GOSPEL?

A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH,  
SEPTEMBER 12, 2004

Assigned Gospel Text for Pentecost 15, Year C, Proper 19:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 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." Luke 15:1-10

*"Which one of you doesn't?"  
"Which one of you wouldn't? ...."*

Here's a personal story. I once was lost. Well actually, I've been lost more than once. And once or twice I've been really lost. That's it. I won't bother you with the rather pedestrian, mildly sordid details, since I know some folks don't like long-winded sermons ... But, take it from one who's been really lost, and then – by some reckless, foolish shepherd of God – got found again, it's an occasion for rejoicing. And there's been some wondrous rejoicing since. If this all sounds a bit vague and round about, just fill in your own personal blanks, if you can. It's not an uncommon gospel story.

Here's another personal story that you can probably match, and maybe even raise me one. A number of years ago I was given a watch as a birthday gift. It was one I had admired and wanted for a long time. I thought it was quite handsome, and regarded it as something of value to me. I enjoyed wearing it every day; and I'd take it off admiringly and place it on my bureau each night.

One day it simply showed up missing. Hmm? Well, I said to myself, it's got to be around here somewhere. Leave it alone, it'll come home. It never did.

One more story. When I was about to ask Germaine to marry me I thought I'd increase my odds of her saying yes by essentially bribing her with a beautiful diamond ring. She was thrilled with the ring, and at least agreeable to the match. We've been married now over three years. But about four months after the bishop had blessed the ring, and our union, the ring simply vanished. She was wearing it one night, and found it missing the next day. We did not wait for it to show up on its own. We looked high and low, turning the house upside down and retracing our steps over and over again, all to no avail.

In the end, there was nothing to do but file an insurance claim for something lost, but never found. As you know, your homeowner's policy calls it simply a "mysterious disappearance."

So here are three very personal and very real stories. One was a lost-and-found story, and two were lost-but-never-found stories. One was a reckless gospel story, and the others simply mysterious disappearances. Other than the obvious, what's the difference?

In Luke's gospel story which we all know as the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus asks what might initially sound like a rhetorical question to us: "Who wouldn't?" Who wouldn't leave the ninety-nine and go in search of the one who is lost?

But the answer, of course, is no one would do that. No one recklessly gambles the possible loss of all they've got – ninety-nine out of one hundred – for the sake of the one-percent you lost and may never find again. It's a write-off. For, no matter what may have been its former value, if something lost is never found again, it is as good as worthless. Put another way, no one leaves the vast majority of the good sheep in exchange for the slim possibility of finding the *loser*.

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What if you did? A conventional interpretation of this little lost-and-found story might suggest the idea that one precious lost sheep was of such value to the shepherd that they were willing to gamble the wellbeing of the rest of the flock who didn't wander off and get themselves lost. If that's what we're to conclude, then what a special little lamb that must have been!

On the other hand, what if the lost sheep was no better, nor worse, than the rest of the flock; each of whom at one time or another gets themselves lost? What would that be like, if you were the reckless shepherd who actually recovered that which you may otherwise deem as worthless? Then what? You'd lift the loser up rejoicing on your shoulders, and bring them home, and admit to your friends, "*Rejoice with me over finding the loser I lost?!*"

And to the strange looks on your friend's faces – Jesus elaborates – we're invited to not only rejoice with our friend who seems to have lost their mind, but be joined as well by the hosts of heaven; those angels who, in *our Savior's* words, get more excited over one loser that's no longer lost than the rest of the flock who don't need to be found.

There's a subtly to this otherwise nice pastoral, folksy, yet paradoxical story. Jesus (or Luke's Jesus anyway) interprets and translates the "one lost sheep" as a sinner who has lost their way, but repents; and in so doing is found again. Couple things:

What can we say about the one who gets lost? It was their own doing? Well, if you know *anything* about how sheep – that is, just how dumb they *really* are -- getting lost is *not* an exception to the rule. So it wasn't just one out of hundred who got lost. It was *this* particular one out of the whole flock, who just *happened* to be the one to get lost *this* time!

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