

Pentecost 16 – Year C
16 September 2007
Saint Anne’s Episcopal Church
Lee’s Summit, Missouri

Luke 15:1-10

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people and kindle in them the fire of your love. AMEN.

A number of years ago, when my daughter Elizabeth was in seventh grade, we lived in Washington, D.C., while I completed a sabbatical year, working on Capitol Hill. For that year, our home was an apartment on Wisconsin Avenue, just north of the National Cathedral.

When Mother’s Day came that year, Elizabeth walked down to a small book shop about a block from our apartment building and bought a large poster as a gift for me. That poster is still incredibly dear to me. I had it matted and framed, and it has hung in every place I’ve lived since she gave it to me.

The poster features a print of the final Clement Hurd illustration from Margaret Wise Brown’s beautiful story book, *The Runaway Bunny*. It’s a book that Elizabeth and I had read together many, many times when she was a little girl, and I continue to be deeply touched that she would choose it as a gift for me.

As I’ve worked with this week’s lectionary text from the Gospel of Luke, I’ve thought quite a lot about that print and the book from which it is taken.

Many of you probably know the story of *The Runaway Bunny* well. But if you're not familiar with the book, it's the story of a little bunny who is intent on running away, and of his mother, who is equally intent on his not getting away from her.

Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, "I am running away." "If you run away," said his mother, "I will run after you. For you are my little bunny."

As the story continues, the little bunny devises more and more fantastical imaginary schemes for running away...becoming a fish and swimming away from the mother bunny, becoming a rock on a mountain high above the mother bunny, becoming a crocus in a hidden garden, becoming a bird and flying away...you get the idea.

And, in every case, the mother bunny persistently and creatively tells her little bunny that, no matter what he does to run away and to escape from her, she will do whatever it takes to get him back.

If he becomes a fish, she will become a fisherman and fish for him.

If he becomes a rock on a mountain, she will become a mountain climber and come to where he is.

If he becomes a crocus in a hidden garden, she will become the gardener.

If he becomes a bird and flies away, she will become a tree that he flies home to.

No matter how he tries to run away, she will not allow him to get away from her.

In today's reading from Luke's Gospel, we have two parables told by Jesus, each about a person, who like the mother bunny, was determined to find something that had been lost.

The first parable in today's reading is about a shepherd who had one hundred sheep - one of which had gotten lost out in the wilderness. The second is about a woman who had lost one of a set of ten silver coins.

Now, these two parables are actually two-thirds of a set of three parables in the fifteenth chapter of Luke's Gospel about people who have lost something. The third parable in this set, the one not included in today's reading, is about a father who has lost one of his two sons. You probably know this parable well - it is usually called the story of the prodigal son.

Parables are incredible, brief, little stories that Jesus told to teach some truth to his first century Palestinian audience. Jesus' parables used things that would have been common to the everyday life of these Palestinian peasants in the first century. Things that people in that time and culture would relate to. For example, in the parables from today's reading - the experience of a shepherd in the wilderness and the experience of a woman managing her household.

Today, most of us probably don't know many shepherds in our everyday life and the way households were managed in first-century Palestine is probably not the way we manage our houses today. With our twenty-first century ears and frame of reference we may miss how amazingly shocking these little stories must have been to those with first-century peasant ears and frame of reference. These stories are full of twists and turns and unexpected endings and details that may be hard for us to notice and understand.

In addition, I think we can sometimes misunderstand Jesus' objective in telling these wonderfully crafted, strange little stories. Robert Farrar Capon, an Episcopal priest and author, has said that we tend to think that the parables Jesus' told are about us. And, this is where we miss the point.

The point is that the parables are not about us. The parables of Jesus are first and foremost about how God works in the world. The parables aren't focused on us and they aren't aimed at telling us what we should do. Instead, they tell us about God and God's action in relationship to us. If we can get this focus clear in our minds, then we can hear parables and interpret them in a way that I think is more in line with the way Jesus told them.

So, back to today's reading. A shepherd looking for one lost sheep and a woman looking for one lost coin. What do these stories tell us about God and God's action in the world?

First, can we even imagine how shocking, even scandalous these stories would sound to first-century Palestinian peasants? Why shocking and scandalous? Because in these stories God is cast in the role of a shepherd and in the role of a woman. Think about that for a moment.

First, Jesus said God is like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep. To those upstanding, socially acceptable Pharisees and scribes listening this must have been truly unbelievable. You see shepherds were a class of laborers held in very low esteem in first-century Jewish culture. God – like a shepherd? Hmmmm...I don't think so.

And, then Jesus went even further. God is like a woman looking for a lost coin in her home. God like a woman – a member of the least powerful group in the society, someone who was literally treated like chattel in family and marital relationships? Hmmmm...I don't think so.

Then, Jesus begins each parable by asking a question.

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?

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?

Well, which of you would act like this? Which of you would leave ninety-nine sheep out in the wilderness with wolves and coyotes and all kind of danger to go look for one lost sheep? Is that any way to run a shepherding business?

Which of you would burn valuable oil to light your lamp and spend all day sweeping and sweeping in all the dark corners of a dirt-floored room, neglecting every other chore you had planned to do that day, trying to find one lost coin? Is that any way to keep the household budget in line and to keep the house functioning smoothly?

Hmmmm...I don't think so.

Even with our twenty-first century ears and frame of reference, we know that nobody in their right mind, nobody with good common shepherding or household management sense would act like this.

And, then after finding the lost sheep and the lost coin, how do the shepherd and the woman respond to finding these lost things?

Does the shepherd hurry back to the ninety-nine sheep he had left out in the wilderness to be sure they are okay and drop the one found sheep back in the pen with them before he heads home for the night?

Does the woman put the found coin back in the box with the other coins and get back to the household chores that she's been neglecting all day?

Nope. That's not how these stories end.

The first parable doesn't say anything about those ninety-nine sheep that the shepherd had left alone out in the wilderness. It says that the shepherd triumphantly carried the lost sheep home with him that night and threw a big party for his friends and neighbors.

And, the second parable doesn't tell us that the woman carefully placed the lost coin back with the other nine in the set. It says the woman, as soon as she found the lost coin, called up everyone she knew and spent even more money to throw a big party for all her friends and neighbors.

By this time, those upstanding, socially acceptable Pharisees and scribes who thought they had it all together when it came to religion, who thought they had God all figured out, had to be scratching their heads!

In these parables, I think Jesus was telling us to be careful when we think we have God all figured out, when we think we know how God will act and what God will do. When the Pharisees and the scribes thought they knew what God thought about the tax collectors and sinners that were coming around Jesus, even eating dinner with him, that was the time Jesus said, "Hmmm...I don't think so."

What we learn about God in these parables is that God is a relentless and tireless searcher for the lost, even a foolishly persistent searcher by human standards. God doesn't give up the search no matter who we are, no matter whether other people or even we, ourselves, think we're worth looking for.

And, God doesn't give up the search no matter how we got lost. Whether we wandered away like the sheep or we just fell in a corner like the coin with no consciousness of our lostness and no ability to do anything about. No matter how lost we are God will not allow us to stay lost.

No, God will keep searching, calling, looking, turning over every rock in the wilderness where we are wandering and checking every dark corner where we may be hiding. God will do whatever it takes to get us back.

We hear in these parables that God can be trusted to seek us and to love us. Not to give up on us, even when everyone around us may have given up on us and we may have given up on ourselves. God never ceases to search out and find the lost. And, when the lost is found, God throws a big party to celebrate.

Now, back to the mother bunny and her little bunny with a mind to wander.

The image on that poster that Elizabeth gave me, the one that closes the book – it's the mother bunny and her little bunny safely together in the rabbit hole under a tree.

“Shucks,” said the bunny, “I might just as well stay where I am and be your bunny.” And so he did. “Have a carrot,” said the mother bunny.

After all our wandering and falling in dark corners and being lost, after God's relentless searching and sure finding, just like the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, and the wandering bunny we hear the concluding words of the hymn we will sing in a few moments -

*There would I find a settled rest, while others go and come;
no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home.*

AMEN