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*Sermon*

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Today we hear two of the three parables of the lost or as some call them, the three parables of joy.

The stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin are familiar ones, and they are followed by the story of the prodigal son. Which was left out of our lectionary today.

Luke suggests that Jesus tells these parables in response to criticism from the Pharisees who believe he's spending too much time with tax collectors and sinners.

Tax collectors seemed to enjoy a special status as sinners in the eyes of the Jews. The tax collectors were also Jewish. But they were the agents of Rome, appointed to collect the Roman tax from the people of the occupied Roman lands. Roman citizens themselves did not pay taxes. The tax collectors were typically exploitive, they were greedy thieves who took more than required and cheated the people. Jesus often dined with these men and other sinners who are considered the unclean, the far reaches of society.

William Barclay tells us that those who did not keep the law perfectly were called People of the Land by the Pharisees.

There was a iron clad wall of ill will that separated the Pharisees from the people of the land.

They would not intermarry, eat together or socialize. They considered testimony from one of these sinners suspect, would not take direction from them, would not give money to them.

They were forbidden from having dinner together or engaging in business dealings. You can see then, why Jesus' actions astounded them.

You can almost hear them thinking, "Does this Jesus loves sinners more than the righteous?" And the answer is both yes and no.

Jesus wants to teach the righteous that God, their father is constantly seeking them out, searching for the lost and sinful to bring them home to wholeness and life. Jesus tells them that God will "always take the initiative in seeking out what is lost. and there is always great rejoicing when that which was lost is found." (Luke 15:7.)

In the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus is speaking to a people who know sheep and understand shepherding.

In those times, families might shepherd their own sheep, but it was also common for communities to have shared herds that shepherds tended. So three shepherds might spend their days watching the sheep, then bring them into a shared sheepfold at night.

Now, sheep are like teenagers or toddlers. They are willful and tend to wander. A shepherd knew each sheep and tried to keep the woolly creatures from wandering off steep ledges, straying into predator's territory and breaking brittle limbs on rocks, crevices and ravines.

If a sheep was missing, the shepherd stayed until it was found. Two shepherds might return at the usual time bringing their sheep and tell the town that the third shepherd was missing, looking for a lost sheep.

Looking for the sheep had its own dangers as shepherds could fall,

break bones and be subject to the same dangers as the lambs they tended. A shepherd would not return without the lost sheep, carrying back the body if it had died to show how it had died and why.

When the shepherd returned, carrying the wayward lamb over his shoulders the town would erupt in cheers of joy and relief.

This is why it is called not only a parable of the lost but one of joy. Because the community responds in joy to God's mercy in bringing the sheep and shepherd back to safety and community.

So too with the woman. She has lost one of her 10 coins, and must search for it. The value of the coin is about one day's wage and many day's savings. It is very possible it is one of 10 coins that forms her marriage garland, a traditional headdress made of 10 silver drachmas that tells others that she is married.

This headdress is something that took years to save for and is so important that even if she or her family owes a debt it cannot be taken from her.

To lose a coin off this headdress was devastating then for social, romantic and financial reasons. She searches her home, moving aside the reeds and rushes that cover the hard earth packed floor and uses candles, oil lamps and the small amount of sun that was able to come through the one window most homes had to find the coin glinting in the dust and reeds.

Her friends and family share her joy in finding such an important symbol and possession.

Even the Pharisees understand these stories. They share in the joy

of lost things being found. What is surprising to them, what is a new thought is that God is seeking the lost, actively working to bring the lost, the sinful, the forsaken to foundness, to restoration and inclusion in God's family.

The Jews understood sin to be separation from God and felt that sin caused God's wrath and anger. If pressed they would have said that repentance might bring about God's forgiveness ... but the concept of God actively seeking out the sinful, lovingly working toward restoration, absolution and wholeness, well, that was radically new.

And like many new concepts, it was misunderstood and resisted. The Pharisees were more interested in a sinner being punished than in a sinner being forgiven by God and restored to his rightful place in God's kingdom.

But in telling these parables, Jesus is saying that God's ways are better and infinitely more compassionate than man's.

Barclay reminds us "there is a wonderful thought here. It is the truly tremendous truth that God is kinder than man. The orthodox would write off the tax-collectors and sinners as beyond the pale and as deserving of nothing but destruction; not so God. Men may give up hope on a sinner; not so God.

God loves the folk who never stray away; but in his heart there is the joy of joys when a lost one is found and comes home. It is a thousand times easier to come back to God than to come home to the bleak consideration of men."

May we also be that place of homecoming, offering joyous welcome, restoration, wholeness and compassion to the lost, the sinful, lonely and forgotten. Amen.