

# CELEBRATING INDIVIDUALITY AND COMMUNITY

A bit of God is in each of us

By Tyler Marz



## THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP

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."

## THE PARABLE OF THE LOST COIN

"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 NRSV

These parables take us in so many directions. A few of us certainly have heard them used to call people to repentance, to encourage wayward individuals back to the fold of God—to share that a sinful, lost person is not beyond the redemption of Christ.

Well, not this time. Frankly, that's not what this scripture is about.

Before this, we see themes of the dangers of money, the subjugation of demons to disciples, and repentance. Yet directly following his talks of repentance we see Jesus eating with the scribes, pharisees, and tax collectors. All were maligned because of how they acted, but Jesus ate with them. In the parable of the lost sheep, we also see him eating with sinners.

We talk about radical hospitality fairly often in

scripture and the church. We see it in hymns like "Draw the Circle Wide" and "All are Welcome" or in our Enduring Principles of Worth of All Persons and Unity in Diversity. We hear it in the words of theologian Rachel Held Evans, who talks about the upside-down kin-dom where all are welcome at the table, not on requirements of worthiness or goodness, but because of hunger. We practice it in our open Communion, where all can partake.

Often when we hear the parable of the sheep, we focus on the one that ran away, and how overjoyed we are when it returns. It sometimes is said that the one who ran away has done so out of sin, exclusion, or something else and must repent to return to the fold. Perhaps that isn't the case.

You see, neither a sheep nor a coin, can repent. Let's think about this: Does a coin willfully jump from your pocket or purse to hide? Does a sheep think, "You know what, I am going to run away from my herd"? No. The coin falls through a hole or slips from our hand unknowingly and rolls away, hidden under something or buried in the dirt. A sheep likely is happily munching on some grass, sees another lovely patch, and then another, and another. Before you know it, it is far from its flock.

Sometimes living authentically inadvertently takes us away from our fold, the community, or our purse.

But what about the ninety-nine sheep, or the rest of the coins in the purse? Do they matter? Why are we so focused on the one? Especially when this scripture isn't about the one doing anything. Perhaps the ninety-nine are where they are supposed to be, in community with one another. But maybe we still feel a bit abandoned and alone.

Sheep easily could get lost in the Judean landscape. Judea was hilly. And sheep can climb just about anywhere, places easy to get lost. Similarly, a coin can hide just about anywhere; they are so small!

Scriptures constantly talk about the lost. Not to emphasize the magnitude of which humans can make mistakes, or fall from grace...no. Again, that is not what this scripture is about. It is showing us that God is the magnificent searcher. The One who comes to us no matter where we are, who we are, or what

we are doing. God wants us in community with one another and for us to celebrate! God wants us to be our authentic selves and show that to the world.

That is why the parable that follows this scripture is of the prodigal son. Again, it's the beauty of celebration!

An interesting bit as well: Both the shepherd and the woman searching for their lost represent God. This is the only time in scripture we see a parable so specifically and clearly mentioning the Divine as feminine. It shows the depth and breadth that God is and who is welcome in community.

Many scriptures are about education and teaching...and teaching in biblical times was done more by imprinting characteristics, morals, and ideals from teacher to student. Rather than simply being taught and applying what you learned, a teacher modeled, and students copied.

What has God imprinted on us? A bit of God is in each of us: divine things, wonderful gifts, talents, and characteristics that make us unique. Our individuality and authenticity are divinely given. So perhaps when God searches for us, it's about unifying the Divine in us with the Divine in them, the ninety-nine.

Perhaps it is about recognizing the unique value of our giftedness and the importance it has in community with the rest of the coins in our purse, or sheep in our fold. Our gifts and talents are ours and are not meant to look like anyone else's.

This scripture is not about sin or defining who the lost are and bringing them back. It is about celebrating that God finds us where we are—no matter how seemingly difficult. It is about the importance of community, our giftedness in being together.

The lost coin probably was a drachma, possibly the cost of a sheep. No wonder it was put so close to the previous parable. It also was likely a day's wage. That could buy a few things, but a year's wages could buy so much more! Our talents, while amazing, can produce so much more when combined with others.

Community matters. Who you are matters.

The mention of sin and repentance is not about actions that separate us from God; it's about the importance of being close to God in community, physically or connected by our bond, care, and love for one another.

I am sure that at times we all have felt like a ninety-nine or a one...feeling separated from God, abandoned. Or perhaps we are that money left in a coat pocket and forgotten, shoved to the back of our closet for the next

season. How many of us ever have put on a coat for the first time in the season and found a bit of unexpected money in the pocket?

The point is, we are meant to be united. Who we are matters because it makes our community better. Sin and repentance aren't just about correcting wrong action and certainly aren't pointing out a list of faults; they're about reconciling relationships. That is the core of repentance: reconciliation.

Salvation isn't about a place we go, but a way of being in community with one another. God cares about us so much that God goes to the rocky hillside, damp caves, dusty places under our couches or beds and says, "Hey...you're amazing, unique! Let's go meet some other people who are amazing and unique. Together, we can celebrate!"

You aren't greater than anyone else, you aren't less than anyone else. You are you, and that is amazing!

