

Worth the Search
Parables Series: Stories About God's Generosity
Sermon on Luke 15:1-10 (7/4 & 7/5/15)
Jennifer M. Hallenbeck

Today we begin a three-week sermon- and worship-related focus on the parables in chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke. There are three parables – three stories Jesus tells – in Luke chapter 15: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and, the story most commonly known as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.”

//

In a three-week stretch of sermons on three particular parables, you might think I'd take a week for each parable. I'm choosing, instead, to focus on the first two parables today – the parables of the lost sheep and coin – in a single sermon... and to then spend two weeks exploring the third parable – the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

This is partly because it took Jesus twice as many verses to tell the Parable of the Prodigal Son as it took him to tell the parables of the lost sheep and coin...but it's mostly because the Parable of the Prodigal Son is so full, so rich in meaning, that it's worth our time and energy to spend two weeks on it.

That said, being *worthy* – being *worth* someone's time and attention – is sort of the general theme of these three parables in Luke 15. So keep that in mind as we begin to wander our way through these three stories...and, today, in particular, as we look at the first two of these three: the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

// //

In our culture – and, perhaps especially in this part of the country – we often struggle mightily with the idea of being and feeling “worthy.”

Around here, we like to be humble...we like to not think too much of ourselves. Yet, around here, we do take pride in hard work: if we amount to anything in this life, it's not because of some natural, internal “worth” – it's because we *earned* it. Because we worked hard for everything we have. So says Midwest culture, anyway, right? We are *worthy* because of what we've done.

Or, for some of us, our “worth” may seem less dependent upon hard work and more dependent upon someone else's love and affection. If someone loves us – romantically or otherwise – we feel validated; if not, we feel worthless...unattractive, uninteresting.

It can be very easy to allow ourselves to *feel* “worth it” only when we know we've worked hard or when someone loves us. But both of those options are based on human beings: our own abilities and work ethic...

or someone else's behavior toward us.

Friends, our worth – and the worth of our fellow human beings – *has* to come from another source. Because human beings will fail us. We will fail ourselves, and so will our dearest loved ones. The message of Luke chapter 15 is that our worth comes not from human beings, but from the Holy One who searches for us when we get lost.

Listen, again, to Luke 15:1-10. As I reread these verses of Scripture, pay careful attention to the setting – make note of who is present as Jesus tells these powerful little stories:

Tax collectors and sinners were all crowding around to listen to Jesus. So the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses started grumbling, "This man is friendly with sinners. He even eats with them." Then Jesus told them this story:

"If any of you has a hundred sheep, and one of them gets lost, what will you do? Won't you leave the ninety-nine in the field and go look for the lost sheep until you find it? And when you find it, you will be so glad that you will put it on your shoulder and carry it home. Then you will call in your friends and neighbors and say, 'Let's celebrate! I've found my lost sheep.'"

Jesus said, "In the same way there is more happiness in heaven because of one sinner who turns to God than over ninety-nine good people who don't need to ... Jesus told the people another story:

"What will a woman do if she has ten silver coins and loses one of them? Won't she light a lamp, sweep the floor, and look carefully until she finds it? Then she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, 'Let's celebrate! I've found the coin I lost.'"

Jesus said, "In the same way God's angels are happy when even one person turns to him."

//

So. The setting of this passage includes Jesus and several groups of people: tax collectors and sinners – those who were crowding around to listen to and learn from Jesus – as well as Pharisees and teachers of the Law of Moses...Pharisees and teachers of the Law both being groups of Jewish religious leaders – you know, pastor types...people like me and my colleagues...leaders of religious groups who like to remind the public what is and is *not* considered faithful.

Please keep in mind that *everyone* mentioned here would have been Jewish: Jesus, the tax collectors, the sinners...as well as the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They were all Jewish, but the writer, Luke, puts them in specific categories for a reason.

First off, we have “tax collectors and sinners.” These are the ones, in today's reading, who chose to crowd around Jesus in order to hear what he had to say...in order to intentionally learn from him. Yet, Luke tells us these folks are “tax collectors and sinners” on purpose: we are meant to think of these folks as the scum of the earth, the lowest of the low.

Here in The United States, we may have some resentment about the Internal Revenue Service – partly because we'd prefer to keep *all* of our paychecks and partly because we may not entirely appreciate where all of our tax money goes – but, by and large, we understand that taxes are a necessary part of doing business in a civilized society.

We rely on the government to do lots of things on our behalf and the money for those things, rightly so, must come from the citizenry. Here in The United States, we do not – by and large – despise those who work for The Internal Revenue service...we do not despise our national “tax collectors.” In Jesus' time, however, folks felt a little differently...because the taxes being collected were not necessarily going to pay for their *own* government's services on their behalf.

See, around Jesus' lifetime, much of the land of Israel was under the occupation of the Roman government and military – and this was *not* the choice of the Jewish people, *Jesus'* people.

They had been invaded by Rome...they were living under Roman rule...and the tax collectors mentioned in today's reading would have been Jewish people who were collecting taxes for *Rome*. So, they were almost like traitors to their own people. And, on top of that, many of these tax collectors collected more money than they were supposed to and became wealthy on the backs of their own people.

So some of those who had gathered to learn from Jesus were despised tax collectors...and some of them were, as Luke calls them, “sinners.”

Now, as Christian people today, we tend to have a general understanding that *everyone* is a “sinner” – that we all do things that harm ourselves and others – things that put a strain on our relationship with God. As Christians today, we understand that we are *all* in need of God's mercy and forgiveness.

What Luke would have meant to imply when he talked about “sinners,” was people who had disobeyed the Jewish religious law in some way, shape, or form – and to such an extent that they were somehow outside of the religious community.

For the Jewish people in Jesus' time, strict adherence to Jewish religious laws was of the utmost importance. These religious laws included issues of morality like murder and adultery,

but the religious laws also included things like ritual purity: laws about what you could and couldn't eat, as well as what you could and couldn't touch.

Ritual purity was important because it helped maintain your own righteousness and the community's righteousness. To be "righteous" meant being in *right* relationship with God – being "righteous" meant doing things that *helped* your relationship with God and *not* doing things that hurt your relationship with God.

We don't know what exactly made the folks in Luke chapter 15 "sinners" by definition...we just know that, somehow, they engaged in behavior that was deemed harmful to themselves and to the rest of the Jewish religious community.

Along with the despised tax collectors, Jesus hung out with – and was even known to *eat* with – these "sinners." When we picture this story, we are meant to picture the lowest of the low in our society... those whose morals we question unequivocally and whose behavior has caused them to be outcasts.

In addition to imagining people you simply dislike or with whom you disagree, in order to get the full scope of Luke 15's setting, it might help to imagine Jesus surrounded by people who hurt children or who take advantage of the elderly. The lowest of the low.

"Tax collectors and sinners were all crowding around to listen to Jesus. So the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses started grumbling, 'This man is friendly with sinners. He even eats with them.'"

How dare he...right? Good, religious people are meant to welcome and to eat with other good, religious people. Right? They are not supposed to connect with the lowest of the low.

That seems to be what the Pharisees and the teachers of the law thought, anyway. And perhaps they had good reason. Perhaps they had legitimate concerns about rubbing elbows with non-religious folks or about consorting with the lowest of the low. Perhaps they thought doing so would harm *their* ability to be faithful.

And perhaps there was some integrity in that. If you struggle with a particular sin – or if you struggle with a particularly harmful behavior or habit – sometimes it's best to avoid others who also engage in that behavior or habit. (Think: gossip, constant negativity, or any number of addictions.)

Sometimes there is merit to staying away from people who make it difficult for us to be faithful or to engage in healthy, joyful habits. But I don't think that's Jesus' ultimate point in Luke 15.

Based on the two little stories at the beginning of Luke 15, Jesus seems to be suggesting that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law need to rethink their definition of “sinners.”

Based on these two little stories, Jesus seems to be suggesting that the religious folks need to rethink their ideas about who is – and who is *not* – worth their time and attention.

Because, when we think someone – or a group of someones – is not worth *our* time and attention, we also might dangerously dance with the belief that that same someone – or group of someones – is not worth *God’s* time and attention.

// //

A couple of years ago I had a conversation with a woman who was part of the church I was serving at the time. In this particular conversation, she told me that, whenever she takes her dog for a walk, she makes sure to carefully watch the ground for coins. She does this not because she is financially strapped and in need of spare change.

Rather, she does this because she has great concern for things that are “lost.” Stray coins belong to *someone*...and, when she finds them, she celebrates a little because they have been found – just like the woman in the parable of the lost coin.

Now, my former church member understands this is a bit silly and she laughed as she told me about this years ago. But when she told me about the intensity with which she looks for lost coins, I remembered thinking about the shepherd in the parable of the lost sheep and the woman in the parable of the lost coin.

“If any of you has a hundred sheep, and one of them gets lost, what will you do?” Jesus asked. “Won’t you leave the ninety-nine in the field and go look for the lost sheep until you find it? ... [Or] What will a woman do if she has ten silver coins and loses one of them? Won’t she light a lamp, sweep the floor, and look carefully until she finds it?”

Jesus asks these questions in today’s parables...and they are actually kind of stupid questions because the answer to both of them is a definitive “NO!” Logic and rationality tell us that what the shepherd and the woman do is ridiculous: you do *not* leave 99 obedient sheep and go searching for the one who got lost...and you do *not* spend hours and hours ripping your house apart in search of one little coin.

Without you around, the obedient sheep might themselves go astray and no woman in Jesus’ time would have wasted a week’s worth of household chores – thus causing even *more* work – by turning things upside-down in search of one piddly, little coin.

One sheep out of 99 and one coin out of ten are just *not* worth the search!
Right? Isn't that what logic and rationality tell us?

Well...it's what logic and rationality might tell us, but it's not what *Jesus* is telling us. By telling these stories – and by telling them surrounded by the particular people with whom he's surrounded – Jesus is making an important point he doesn't want anyone to miss.

The “tax collectors and sinners” need to hear the message that they are, in fact, worthy of God's mercy and grace. And the religious leaders need to hear that, too: that the lowest of the low – those who have gone astray, those who are lost – that they, too, are worth the search.

//

Friends, regardless of who we are, and regardless of how religious we are, we are *all* sinners. We all do things – and we all *fail* to do things – that harm ourselves and others. If our worthiness were dependent upon always doing the right thing and never doing the wrong thing, *none* of us could sit up straight and proud.

We all fall short of God's glory. In that sense, *none* of us is “worth the search” when we get lost – and lost we *will* get. Yet...

Yet here we have Jesus telling us these parables about two seemingly worth/less things – 1 sheep out of 100 and 1 inexpensive coin out of 10. These two seemingly worthless things were *worthy* enough for a shepherd to risk the other 99 sheep and for a woman to spend her time and energy turning her house upside-down.

The *one* sheep and the *one* coin were worth the search – despite all evidence to the contrary.

The same is true for you...for me...and, whether we like it or not, the same is true for everyone else.

We are *all of us* worth the search. And the One who grants us this worth is God Almighty, creator of heaven and earth – finder of lost sheep and coins alike...all over this wide world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.