

Jesus well knew any good parable has to have a few things going for it in order for it to “work.” There has to be some drama—otherwise, who cares? There has to be some main point. The details may be interesting or colorful, but they will lead us astray if we focus on peripherals and not on the main point. And there has to be some surprise at the core, some jolt, some shock—otherwise, the parable, the mini-story, doesn’t penetrate our defenses and so has no power to motivate or change us.

What would you say is the main point of the parables we just heard?

(While we consider these things, maybe it will help to notice that in this parable Jesus has punched out for us a divine skylight into the very workings of heaven. Jesus means for us to see and come to share in the heart of God. How often are we offered a direct window into the behind-the-scenes drama going on in heaven? Come on; let’s adjust our vision to see what we can see...)

Jesus is talking to the religious leaders, who are plenty irritated because of the way Jesus keeps attracting the lowlifes, the sinners, the misfits. Didn’t He know, this supposed prophet of God, that you are known by the company you keep? Didn’t He know holy men and rabbis were responsible for the quality of their followers?

So Jesus answered their accusations with these twin parables. He leads off with the one about the shepherd and the sheep—a risky gambit, given that to Pharisees sheep were extremely dirty and therefore shepherds who hung around them were extremely “unclean,” intrinsically and ritually “unclean,” which was far worse in their eyes. Then there’s the one about the lost coin.

We know the good shepherd stands in for God in this first mini-drama, then the homemaker does. The shepherd notices one of his hundred sheep is missing, and decides to go off and find it. The woman notices one of her ten smallish silver coins is missing, so she decides to look for it. So what’s the big drama? What’s the point?

But let’s put it the way Jesus does. You’re this shepherd owns 100 head of sheep, probably about average for a family farmer back then. You take the head count and you notice one is lost. Right there in the middle of the danger, the wilderness, with barely a second thought you take off to find it. Never mind the 99, who will now remain shepherdless and therefore extremely vulnerable in the same wilderness. Never mind the wolves, the ravines, the treacherous places the 99 may wander into. But you leave the 99 and take out after the lost one.

And when do you come back to check up on the flock? When do you finally give up on the lost one because you’ve gone too far away from the flock already and it’s beginning to look like you might never even find the one? How far away is too far, how long is too long?

Jesus says the shepherd goes after that lost one and keeps after it “until He finds it.” Until He finds it. No limit. No turning back, no giving up, no rationalizations like “I’ve done my best.” (All the while the 99 are in jeopardy—but the shepherd keeps after the lost one “until he finds it.”)

This Shepherd is crazy! His priorities are upside down, He has no common sense. (Even the Pharisees, city people, could see this.) The Shepherd is crazy!

The shepherd risks everything—his flock (which is his economic security and his livelihood) as well as his own welfare and comfort and even his reputation in order to find that one lost sheep. When he finds it, he lifts it gently onto His shoulders to carry it home. Then, to make matters worse, in his happiness and delirium he has to go out and tell all his neighbors about it and invite them to a big feast he prepares (which will no doubt cost him another lamb or two! From the economic perspective, he'd have been a lot better off to let the first one go.) And who wants to admit to his friends and fellow shepherd he let this one get away in the first place? Isn't this the sort of secret most people want to keep to themselves?

Why does the shepherd behave this way? He's crazy! He's crazy for that one lost sheep. Just like God the Father, of course: crazy for that one lost sheep. Just like Jesus the Son: "I have come to seek and save the lost." Yes, crazy for you and me already in the flock, here this morning to worship God—but especially crazy about the lost. Eager to go to any length, pay any price to find each one of them and bring them into loving relationship with Him.

We are not used to seeing people thru the eyes of God. Many people see individuals as units of function or utility. Corporations see us as consumers: what do we wear, what do we drive, what do we buy? How much will we spend to justify their advertisement and promotion budgets? Restaurateurs and fast food chains see us as diners or grazers: how can they most effectively convince us to eat in their place rather than someone else's? Politicians and charities and causes see us as voters and donors: what do they need to say to convince us to vote for them, to send dollars to support their positions? Banks and lenders see us as potential borrowers, re-financers: what do they need to offer us to induce us to mortgage with them...it goes on and on. Who else sees you as a unique human being of infinite value and worth, created by God in the image and likeness of God? Bought with a price, redeemed and reconciled forever at the cross?

[Many of the sheep in this country are looking for refuge in a different place. As Joseph Califano (former Secretary of HEW, 1977-79; now chairperson, National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, Columbia University) has recently written in his book *High Society* how our culture is increasingly turning not to Jesus or His Church, but to drugs—legal and illegal. We Americans make up 4% of the world's population but consume two-thirds of the world's illicit drugs. 61 million of us are habitual smokers, and more than 16 million of us alcoholics. On any given day, 100 million of us are taking antidepressants, tranquilizers, or painkillers. The Government then spends billions of dollars trying to clean up the mess of social illnesses all this substance abuse brings about: according to Califano, substance abuse is the primary contributor to violent crime, excessive health care costs, domestic violence, [the disintegration of the family,] child abuse, poverty, rates of incarceration, etc. Millions of Americans who once turned to priests, ministers, or rabbis—to church or synagogue—now go to physicians and psychiatrists who can dispense keys to the kingdom of pharmaceutical relief. Many go to drug dealers and liquor stores. (I suspect the statistics in our neighborhoods more or less mirror the national average: maybe fewer street drugs, but more high end prescription drugs.)

God sees you and each of those lost sheep not as an addict or a diner or a borrower or a voter—but as a mother sees her baby, as a father sees his child. God does not look at you or me or "the lost" as consumers; does not see us from the economic

perspective. (I'm glad I know the answer to this question in advance: which one of you would tell a grieving mom whose little toddler "didn't make it" thru open heart surgery for that congenital defect, "don't worry, don't be sad—after all, you still have your two other children at home.") When you understand the heart of God, this way of thinking is obscene.

Here's the main point: God regards every person on planet earth as His beloved child. Lost, perhaps, but greatly beloved. So beloved that no cost is too high for Him to pay, no risk is too great for Him—to take out after us, to keep pursuing us, to bring us back home. "For God so loved the world He sent His only-begotten Son..." [John 3:16] "While we were still sinners Christ died for us..." [Romans 5:8]

God so loves the lost that He keeps seeking after them "until He finds them," and the joy in heaven so overflows that there is great rejoicing; the angels throw a great party—singing and dancing and music and drinks all around. This is what we see when we look up thru that divine skylight: no wrathful, angry God but the partying God hosting the mother of all Fiestas. The eternal Party.

These parables are primarily about God, but Jesus also tells us a lot about how God views us people. He almost never talks about people as "sinners," but rather as "lost"—a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son in the far country. But "lost" has nothing to do with intrinsic value and everything to do with location, with position, with relationship. The lost sheep didn't quit being a sheep—as it wandered off it simply became the same sheep in the wrong location with respect to the flock and the shepherd. The lost coin didn't become worthless, it just became lost. (Like a \$20 bill misplaced in the "ones" drawer of the cash register—it's still a "20," just stuck away in the wrong place until the cashier notices.)

Jesus thinks of us human beings not as sinners, not as hopelessly flawed, but as "lost"—in the wrong location in relationship to God. Until we repent, until we allow the shepherd to bring us Home, until we turn out life and will over to God, we are in the wrong position with respect to God. We are lost in relation to God. Separated. Alienated.

(This is important to remember: in some religions, some churches, people may tend secretly to think that because they have been "found" by God and brought into His flock they are somehow better or more valuable than those still on the outside. (Not so—after all, the only admissions policy to get into Christ's Church is to admit we are sinners incapable of running our own affairs, our own lives. The cleansing of baptism is not for the righteous, but for us sinners.)

Let's also note that Jesus has already settled the question of ownership. Being "lost" means that the sheep had to belong to someone in the first place. (A wild beast could never have been "lost.") All the sheep belong to their shepherd. Until the storm comes, the wolf comes, the drought comes, the flash flood comes, they might think they are doing fine as free agents. But they will fare much better in His flock, in His care, whether they know it yet or not. Jesus doesn't fiddle around with these basics. God has created human beings for communion, for loving relationship with Him. He has sent the Son, the Good Shepherd. We don't need to be timid where our Lord is so clear. (Always respectful of others, shrewd, strategic—but not timid.)

(If the one lamb and the one coin turn up lost, missing, whose fault is it? This is not the main point of the parable—the parable is really about God more than about us—but it’s a question worth asking. Whose fault is it?)

The lamb, true, did nibble itself away. We know this syndrome all too well. We mean well, we don’t try to be unfaithful; our schedules just get so extremely busy, and Sunday morning is the only sane family time we have, and besides, I never agreed to that stupid policy of worshipping here every single Sunday I’m within 30 miles anyway... We all know: Lambs seldom make the grand defiant gesture. They simply get diverted, they get preoccupied, one clump of grass at a time, not meaning any harm by it—until they gradually forget about the Shepherd, until His voice sounds so distant, they cannot find their way back Home. (And if the Christian life is this tricky for you and me, what must it be like for those still lost, those who do not yet know the Good Shepherd? Still it is for them, in this parable, anyway, the Shepherd goes to such great lengths.)

On the other hand, nobody can blame the coin for being lost. The fault was with the hand that dropped it. How many hands may have dropped those still outside Christ’s Church? Who and what have helped to harden their hearts against yielding to the love of the Shepherd? A rough upbringing, an abusive parent. A broken marriage and a broken heart. Financial ruin. Chronic or sudden illness. Loneliness or depression. Youthful dreams never achieved. Parents or teachers or schools or movies or professors who always taught that God is irrelevant and Christianity is for losers and wimps. Christians in name only.

There are a million different reasons why people may keep their distance from Jesus—but not a single one of them stops the Good Shepherd from loving, from caring, from pursuing them to the End. And, as you know, every one of those million reasons, can also become a springboard into Christ’s Church, into loving relationship with God, when anyone freely repents and turns over their past and their brokenness, along with their gifts and their potential and their future, into the care of our Lord.)

I hope we all hear the great hopefulness in this divine picture of the Shepherd who keeps searching after the missing lamb, the missing coin. When you are feeling alone, or tired, or maybe far from God, or unable to hear His Voice, or unwilling to practice the spiritual disciplines which allow you more readily to enter into deeper relationship with God and each other—Jesus is telling us God still keeps coming after you...until He finds you. The lost coin cannot do a blasted thing other than to wait in isolation—but the Woman keeps looking for it—frantically, tirelessly, until she finds it. Then she’s so happy about it nothing else matters. Just so God keeps coming after you, and after those still outside the Church. Until He finds them.

I think you all get the point. OK, OK: we know God loves those still separated from Him with a crazy love and a stick-to-itiveness which will not quit. And when we peer up thru that divine skylight Jesus has offered us, when we squint beyond this regular dimension of our five senses up into the heavenly realm, we see the angels in heaven joining the Shepherd, the Woman, in their joy. (Joy like when you lost your child in the crowds at LAX or Disneyland for a few frantic minutes and then finally, after a brief eternity, you spot him again!) This celebration in heaven will not quit.

But skylights work both ways. We do see up and out, but the light also floods down into the four walls of the home. During the daytime it comes streaming in, entirely

changing the aspect of the space below. Jesus is inviting whomever hears these parables to be inspired, be moved by a “little slice of heaven,” to enter into His joy. The way we enter into this joy is to see with His eyes, share in His heart, take part in His saving work.

Many of you know this is a very special church—that is, you are a very unusual people. You also know our blessings, our resources, our learning, our experience with the Holy Spirit exist primarily in order to be offered on to others.

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Thank God, (and especially Ed and Joe and Guido and Trish) and thanks to many of you, we will soon enjoy a renovated kitchen and a magnificent new Mertz Hall (probably mostly finished by early September; the floors able to withstand heavy lifting and dragging and dropping by mid-October.) I can’t wait to see how we actively turn this resource into a blessing to those many around us who are “lost”—(not more or less sinful or worthy than we, not going off to eternal damnation)—but those who do not know Jesus yet. (Already there’s a team planning for a new movie ministry once we can use Mertz Hall again—let me know if you’re interested! Already our new Logos season is being planned to reach many children not from families involved with this church.)

I know some of you invite and accompany a stream of your friends to worship with us on Sundays. One of you hosts a book discussion group once a month in order to forge relationships between some of your new friends in the church and some of your old friends not in the church, hoping always gently to encourage them into the Kingdom. Some of you support Mary and our youth group in various ways, allowing many young people not yet part of our church to experience something of Christ as they go down to La Mision to serve the children in the Open Arms Daycare Center. I know some of you diligently pray for and spend extra attention and time on the six friends whom you have chosen lovingly to influence into loving relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus. So you share in His joy.

Our building is a treasure in the midst of this town. Our teaching and learning—so much of it you now provide yourselves—is a treasure. Our fellowship and small group activity with one another is a valuable treasure. This church (together with the Holy Spirit) offers a rich depth of community to whomever is willing to join one of our small groups. The point of our small groups is to invite others, others still outside us, to encounter the risen Christ and join on the inside—just as the point of Jesus choosing His twelve and sending the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was to show them how to become a lot more like Him, and a lot more than twelve!

(Our treasures can become a mixed blessing: sometimes we get to enjoying the treasure so much we forget the goal; the goal is to grow us to take the risks, to extend ourselves, to move beyond, for Christ’s sake, what we would have done, what we would have risked, were we not indwelt by His Spirit.)

There is intrinsic value in our abiding in the Vine, Jesus Christ. But the point of our abiding is to bear much fruit. We are the branches, and we have a function to perform as we exist and grow in living relationship with Christ, the true Vine. The function, in the end, is to bear much fruit, which sooner or later is an outer, visible result which affects and benefits others, too.

We pray every day in order to grow strong in our abiding, uncompromising in our allegiance. If we are abiding strong, we can pay any price, take any risk, overcome any

hardship, achieve any victory in accordance with the will of God. The forces of hell cannot prevail against us. But the purpose of our abiding is not merely to abide, but to bear much fruit for Jesus' sake.

There is intrinsic value in tithing 10% of our income and our time and our conversation—but the goal is so that God's Kingdom might increase its resources and Christ's Church might ultimately welcome more lost sheep into life-changing relationship with Him. In this way we share in the joy of the Shepherd. There is intrinsic value to praying and studying some portion of the Scriptures each day—but the point is for us to become more eager agents of our Lord, who spend less of our time and energy arguing with His Holy Spirit and resisting His will, but instead becoming more effective and joyful ambassadors for Him.

We members of Christ's Church have been greatly blessed. We share in the joy above us we gratefully and willingly choose to be sent out, to become a blessing to others in His name.

Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. 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."