

Wesley Uniting Church, Canberra
Sunday 16 September 2007 Pentecost 16
Sermon: Rev James Haire

Jeremiah 4: 11 – 12; 22 - 28

Ps 14

I Timothy 1: 12 - 17

Luke 15: 1 - 10

The Lost Sheep

Text Luke 15: 7:

“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.”

Three parables occur here in Luke. The first one, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, has a parallel in Matthew 18: 12-14. The other two, the Parable of the Lost Coin and the Parable of the Lost Son, only occur in Luke. They must be seen clearly within their own context. The first is about the Lost Sheep, in verses three (3) to seven (7). The second is about the Lost Coin, in verses eight (8) to ten (10). And then, the third parable is that of the Prodigal Son, in verses eleven (11) to thirty-two (32). We only deal here with the first two parables, that is, the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin.

The context is set out in the first two verses of our reading.

Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners, and the scribes and Pharisees are grumbling about that. When Jesus eats with outcasts, it is not just humanitarian broadmindedness, or a cavalier disregard for religious laws. It is God breaking through God's own traditions in order to reach out and save those who have broken them. Jesus takes his place alongside sinners in the place that they are, in order that they might come close to God.

A number of issues need to be born in mind.

First, the issue of what a parable is.

A parable, as we know from Mark 4:10-12, is a story about the nature of God, which radically confronts you and has the effect of changing your whole outlook on life.

In John's Gospel, it is the “I am” sayings of Jesus, like “I am the way the truth and the life”, which confront you and change you. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is the parables. So this Prodigal Son story is going to confront us and change us.

Second, we need to look at the background to these two parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. Let us look at each one.

There is the story of the Lost Sheep. It is primarily about the extravagant love and grace of God towards us. The Shepherd in the story is excessively extravagant toward the sheep, bordering on being imprudent and foolish. It would have been prudent to leave the 99 sheep in the sheep-fold and go to look for the lost sheep. But he leaves the 99 in the desert for the sake of the one. So he is not just calculating; he is extravagant in his love for the one against the interests of the 99, and his own health.

There follows the story of the Lost Coin. Here Jesus is completely inclusive. The first story is a male story. The second story is a female story. The lost coin is a drachma, which is the equivalent of a labourer's daily wage. She has thus ten working day's wages, i.e. the wages of two weeks or a fortnight's pay. She has lost one day's wage. However, in the first century, life was marginal. Therefore, there was very little left over in excess after a week's wages were used for basic expenses. Therefore, an excess of a day's wages could be well a year's savings. This wasn't just a five cent piece! Hence there is the rejoicing.

Third, these two parables control the meaning of the Prodigal Son parable. By itself, the Prodigal Son parable shows the prodigal's self awareness. These parables point to God's overwhelming grace.

The Shepherd's compassion and the woman's concern are overwhelming towards the lost.

In Christian theology, and especially in the Protestant tradition, these have been very important parables, and have had three major teachings:

First, they speak of the unrestricted grace and love of God towards humanity, and especially towards those who are outcasts. The message of Christ is the overwhelming love for the outsider, for the despised and for the rejected. This kind of theology has very heavily influenced the Uniting Church in its relationship to government through its community services work. It has also caused the Uniting Church internal theological struggles about those members who some people would consider to be outcasts within our midst.

The second point began in the interpretation of Martin Luther and has been important in theology, especially in Wesley and subsequently.

In Wesley these two parables are used to express prevenient grace, that is the action of God in seeking out and saving the lost. This stresses the divine initiative in the atonement in which God acts for humanity for that which humanity could not do for itself. Christ is the presence of God in humanity for us, seeking and saving the lost. This relates to three important emphases in the Wesleyan tradition:

1. All can be saved. The offer of salvation is universal. The fallen state of humanity is offset by preliminary or prevenient grace. Thus none will be condemned except by their own fault.
2. All can know that they are saved. This is the doctrine of assurance, an assurance of present salvation.
3. All can be saved to the uttermost. This is variously known as

entire sanctification, scriptural holiness, Christian perfection, or perfect love.

Luther uses the phrase *simul justus et peccator*, which means at the same time justified and a sinner. Luther also uses another line that all people must be damned before they are saved. What Luther means by this is that unless we are like the lost, we cannot be saved. We, if we are not lost, have no need of God. We have to feel completely abandoned, and then we are loved and forgiven. The phrase is often expressed in the hymn: "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."

Third, Karl Barth takes this to the further theological point, based on Calvin, in the *Church Dogmatics* 4/1, 59.2, entitled "The Judge Judged in our Place." What Barth says here is that Jesus becomes the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin for us. In the Incarnation, he goes into the lost-ness of our lives. This is a world of lost-ness, from which he is rescued by God as the forerunner of our being rescued. He, although a Jew, chooses to be a Gentile as the beginning of this passage says – he eats with publicans and sinners. He chooses to be irreligious and to associate with the wrong people.

He chooses to be the Lost Sheep, although he is in fact also the Shepherd. He is truly human. Having been found, he then returns to the Shepherd and we in him are found and brought back to the Shepherd.

So, this act of grace on behalf of the Shepherd towards us is only possible if we see our need for grace and also realise that our need for grace only comes in Christ. The parable shows that Jesus' entire ministry was tied up with his crucifixion.

This leads onto our final conclusion.

The church is the body that lives in rejoicing. It is the body that lives in rejoicing just as the shepherd and the woman rejoice in their find. This means a kind of infectious joy, for all people. Because it is the joy of those who have been saved, who do not deserve to be saved. The church is not therefore a judgemental body, but a body that gives hope.