

The two parables we are about to read are 2 of three parables that have been placed together by the gospel writer Luke. Each of these three parables has to do with something being lost. We will be reading about the lost sheep and the lost coin. After these two parables comes the parable of the prodigal son about a son who wanders away but then is welcomed home by his father.

The gospel writer Luke seems to be fond of putting stories together by threes. There are other places in his gospel where he places three stories or three descriptions together. For Luke, bad things don't happen in threes. In fact, good news happens in threes.

I mentioned that we will be reading two parables. A parable is a story which is told which uses everyday images and the story has multiple layers of meaning. In telling parables Jesus wanted his hearers to do some work on their own and not depend upon him to tell them the answers. Jesus was a storyteller and not much of a lecturer.

He told stories with the challenge to his hearers to figure its meaning out on their own. There were occasions when he did explain the meaning of a parable. In these three parables found in Luke 15 he does not give any explanation. The interpretation is up to the hearer.

Read Luke 15: 1-10

One observation in reading these two parables is the character who does the searching. In the first parable, the one who searches is a shepherd. Shepherds were not considered to be very trustworthy people. They were considered to be trespassing thieves.

Shepherds were looked down upon by the established scribes and Pharisees. But in the story told by Jesus it is a shepherd who becomes the one who searches. The shepherd is the one who seeks the one who is lost.

In the second parable which we read, the one who searches is a woman. A woman is the one who loses a coin and searches and searches until this coin is found. Women, of course, were considered second class citizens in the society. So in these two parables, God is described as a shepherd who searches for a lost sheep and God is described being like a woman who searches for a lost coin.

But like I shared, parables have multiple meanings. They are like an onion with many layers of meaning. And in these parables, could it be that the shepherd and the woman needed to find what was lost because in the journey to find what was lost the shepherd and woman would discover something that they needed?

Could it be that by searching, the shepherd and woman discovered something important in their own faith journey?

Rod Dreher was a successful journalist who had spent his career in big cities. Cities like Dallas, New York, and Philadelphia. He had left his small hometown of St. Francisville, La., at the age of 16 and never thought he'd return to the community of 1,700 people. He could not wait to get out of that backward small town in the bayous of Louisiana.

Rod always felt different than the other boys. He did not like to hunt or fish or play athletics so he was always on the margins. He was a bookish kid who wanted to go to the city and go to museums, bookstores, and movies. But that really wasn't available.

So he left that small town when he was 16. He had the opportunity to go to a state boarding school called the Louisiana School for Math, Science, and the Arts, and it was his salvation. The school gave him a sense of finally finding his real community, and he never looked back to St. Francisville after that.

Rod's younger sister, though, never left that town. She did go off to college at LSU but she returned, married her high school sweetheart and became a teacher. But then when Ruthie had just turned 40, she was diagnosed with cancer. And where Rod once only saw narrow-mindedness and conformity in his hometown, he now saw a deep wellspring of love that poured out for his dying sister.

She eventually did die. But then Rod and his wife made a very surprising decision for him. He and his wife and children moved back to his hometown of St. Francisville.

Rod Dreher says this about his decision. He says, "I didn't come as the prodigal son who was admitting the error of his ways. I came back because I saw something beautiful and even holy here in my hometown and in my family that I hadn't been able to see before and that was only revealed to me by the way my sister died."

But his homecoming also was difficult. He found out that his sister had never forgiven him for leaving home, and his relationships with her husband and younger daughters weren't as close as he had hoped. And tensions with his parents -- unspoken during many years of visiting -- also came to the surface.

Rod Dreher says his sister was very much a girl and a woman of her town. She loved all the things that people in that town loved -- the hunting, the fishing, the athletics -- and she could not have been happier there. He was so proud for her and happy for her that she could find a sense of peace and at-homeness in St. Francisville that he could not. He knew that he had to leave.

He says, though, that he always had this deep, deep longing to return home, but home for him was an emotional concept, a philosophical concept and even a spiritual concept. He was a restless seeker. He was raised Methodist and became a Catholic and then became Eastern Orthodox.

But more than that, he wanted to find a place in the world that he could call home and where he felt like he fit in. Then his sister Ruthie got sick, and he was able to witness from afar the incredible things that people in this little town did for Ruthie and for his mom and dad and for Ruthie's family.

He says he was not surprised because he knew that these were good people. But to stop and realize how unusual it was and to realize, too, that the choices that he had made to move away had repercussions -- he could never have counted on that level of support if he fell terminally ill or his wife died, because he just didn't have the roots there that Ruthie did.

Now, he could have stayed in any one of those places where he had lived -- New York, Dallas, Philly -- and over time could have put down some roots. But he didn't do that, because he did like so many professionals do today and kept chasing the better job. He doesn't think there's anything wrong with that per se, but he failed to account for the cost to himself and his wife and his kids.

Seeing the cancer happen to his sister, who was only 40 when she was diagnosed, made him focus on how vulnerable all of us are.

Rod says he stood there at the front by his sister's casket and greeted all of these people -- many of whom he hadn't seen since he was a child, many of whom he didn't even know. There he began to see that his sister's very small life (small by the standards of the world) of just living at home quietly with all the people she had grown up with, surrounded by her family and teaching in the local school -- there actually was an enormous hidden greatness to it.

There was spiritual grandeur to it that he had not appreciated before, and by the time he left Louisiana after burying his sister, Rod and his wife knew that they were being called to move back to St. Francesville, LA. He was called back to begin the long and difficult process of reconciling with his dad and the rest of his family.

We have read two parables that Jesus told about searching for something that is lost. Searching and searching until it is found. Many of us find ourselves searching for something. Searching for something that we feel is missing in our lives. And many of us keep going faster and faster in our life thinking that one day we will find what it is that we think is missing.

We keep searching for that better paying job, nicer home, better spouse, more dynamic church, better group of friends. Our world tells us that these are the types of things that we should be searching for.

But maybe this parable teaches us to search for that which Rod Dreher found in our story. Maybe more complex is not the direction we should be looking. Maybe we don't need to be looking forward but instead looking back. Maybe we need to go back to seeking where life is simpler. In relationships we already have. In places which are not fancy. In people that may seem quite ordinary.

Maybe what we think we are looking for we have already. Maybe the lost sheep or lost coin is a lot closer than we think. Maybe we are looking too hard to find that which is very close to us.

May God bless you on your journey as you seek that which you think is lost. It may actually be quite close to you. AMEN.

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-Dreher, Rod, "Called to Live in This Community," http://www.faithandleadership.com/ga/rod-dreher-called-live-community?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=headline&utm_campaign=FL_feature

-Given: September 15, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

Prayer of Confession

O God who is like a woman who searches and searches until you find us, we come before you admitting that we take part in activities that lead us lost. We become distracted from following you by following the idols of this world. The nicer stuff, the more expensive items, the friends that are higher on the economic ladder. Teach us to be satisfied with what you already offer us. Help us to appreciate what we already have rather than searching after that which we want but don't really need.

Prayers of the People

O God who is like a shepherd who searches for lost sheep, we come before you sharing today that many times we feel lost and that we are searching. We are searching to satisfy our longing by seeking nicer things in life. But we are becoming unsatisfied as we are beginning to recognize that what we are seeking is not filling what we are missing. Help us to recognize that our relationship with you provides all that we need. Satisfy our craving by showing us how to seek after the relationships that bring us closer to you. God you are like a woman who searches and searches until you find your lost coin. Nurture us and keep searching for us. Do not give up on us even during those times we have given up on you.