

The Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
March 27, 2022
Joshua 5:1-12
Psalm 32
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Things That Are Lost

When my brother and my parents went to Scotland for the first time, they brought me back a wonderful souvenir, a gorgeous pair of Scottish argyll socks in three of my favorite colors. I loved the socks. I loved wearing them. About a year after I received my Scottish argyll socks, as I was doing laundry in the seminary dorm, I somehow lost one of them. I looked all over. All over the laundry room. In all the machines, including all the ones I hadn't used. All up and down the hall between the laundry room and my apartment. Multiple times.

Honestly, I don't know what I did with that sock, where it went missing or how. But somehow or other, I found it again. And I felt I was living a parable. Can you imagine? *A seminarian had two socks....* I was so happy to have found the missing sock. "Come, rejoice with me," I shouted down the hallway, "for I have found my sock which was lost."

I lost the sock. And I found the sock.

Socks come in pairs. If there are only two of something, a pair, and you lose one of them, well, you're down 50%. You've lost half of the whole. It's hard to miss that one of two items is gone.

Sheep, however, are another matter. Especially if you have 100 of them. Just looking out at the pasture, it's difficult to distinguish if there are 100 sheep or only 99. Basically, if you have 100 sheep and only one is missing, you won't know it unless you count them. And it takes more time and more effort to count 100 sheep than to count two socks.

This chapter of Luke, chapter 15, has three parables about lost things. We skipped over two of them and read the third. In the first of these three parables in what some have called "the lost chapter of Luke" because it's all about lost stuff, the owner has lost one of 100 sheep. The sheep didn't lose itself. The owner lost it.

In the second of this series, the owner has lost one of ten coins. It's difficult with just a glance to distinguish if there are nine or ten coins in a stack. You have to count those, too. One of ten coins has been lost by its owner. The coin didn't lose itself. The owner lost it.

And in the third parable in this series, the one we just heard, a man had two sons. Just two. Not 100. Not ten. Two. He loses one, has lost one.

A series of parables. Parables, by definition, have something unexpected. There's always a twist that opens up a new space to understand differently.

Over the centuries, the surprises in Jesus' parables, the twists and turns that would have claimed the attention of first-century hearers and surprised them have pretty much lost their punch.

Most of us have heard the parables of Jesus so often that as soon as one of them begins, in a way we stop listening because we think we already know the story. It's familiar. No surprises here.

Especially for us for whom the parables are so familiar, it's helpful and even generative to excavate some of the particulars of these short stories by Jesus that first-century listeners would not have seen coming.

Professor Amy-Jill Levine, whose work I've recommended to you multiple times, describes what happens in this series of three parables from Luke 15. They are, she says, an example of the folkloric rule of three. The folkloric rule of three. Two models or cases set up a third, and the third one creates a variation on the theme.

The folkloric rule of three. Like in the Three Little Pigs. The straw house and the stick house are blown down by the Big Bad Wolf. These first two set us up for the third. The third house is a brick house, and it withstands the huffing and puffing of the Big Bad Wolf. We expect a variation on the third go 'round: same, same, different. Like duck, duck, goose.

So, first, in this series, Luke tells the lost sheep parable. The owner loses one out of 100, notices the loss, looks for and finds the sheep, and rejoices at finding it.

Second, Luke tells the lost coin parable. The owner loses one out of ten coins, notices the loss, looks for and finds the coin, and not only rejoices herself but invites others in to celebrate with her.

Third, Luke tells the lost son parable. The father loses one of two sons. But doesn't notice the loss. And doesn't look for what is lost. And tries to have a party anyway.

Over and over in Hebrew scripture, we have stories that lead us to side with the younger child or the youngest son or daughter. We tend to identify with and favor Abel, not Cain; Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau; Rachel, not Leah; Joseph, not all his elder brothers; David, not all his elder brothers. Even in the New Testament, we're inclined to favor Mary, not her older sister Martha. We tend in biblical narratives to root for the younger child.

So, when we hear this story that is most frequently called the Prodigal Son, we are set up to identify with the younger son, the so-called prodigal. "Prodigal" is not a title to be proud of, by the way. A prodigal is someone who wastes resources for personal gratification. He's a spendthrift, not a model.

Even so, we are waiting with the father in the story for the younger son, the irresponsible party boy, to come home. And when he does, we are inclined to rejoice with the dad that the son who was lost has been found. And then we realize that he is not the one who is lost.

The lost son is the elder brother, the responsible, hardworking one, the one on whom his father has relied so completely and depended on constantly. So lost is this elder son to his father that the dad doesn't even think to send word to him laboring long in the fields to share the good news that his brother is home and there's gonna be a big party. No. He hears the news after he overhears the party and is told by one of his father's servants.

Only two sons to keep track of. One had been lost to the father perhaps for a very long time. The son wasn't lost. The father lost him. Like the man lost one sheep. Like the woman lost one coin. Taking inventory is a needful activity from time to time.

The man with 100 sheep discovered the loss of one by counting and coming up one short. The woman with ten coins discovered the loss of one by counting and coming up one short. The father with two sons counted *on* one son and indulged the other, but he never communicated to the responsible one that *he* counted, that *he* mattered.

The father lost the son who never left because of neglect. He neglected to communicate his love in a way the son could take in and comprehend.

This season of Lent offers us a time to take inventory, to count up, to assess, to notice if anything or anyone is missing. The entire world, including all of us, has lost much over these past two years. People have died, moved away, moved on. Circumstances have been profoundly altered for millions and millions of people. We have lost how things used to be and accelerated quickly into how things now are.

Much of this is demographic and social change. It reaches into and affects the Church and all its congregations, including this one. We must adapt to the new realities, imagine new approaches, and continue to journey with God and each other into God's promised and unfolding future.

And we need to come to ourselves, as the younger son came to himself in a place far from home, and as the father in the story came to himself when he realized he had lost the son who never left.

Have you lost anything or anyone because of neglect during these last two years of pandemic? Or even during the last few months? A friend? A family member? A group activity? A hobby or pastime or practice that used to give you life and joy and restoration? Have you neglected something? Someone?

Carrying a sheep home on your shoulders or picking a coin up off the floor are much simpler tasks than restoring relationships. The father at the end of the lost son story is trying to bring the elder son back into his own family. He wants him to come to the party thrown in celebration of his brother's return—not because everything has been fixed, not because everything is perfect, but because they are still one family.

Will the son who never left also return? Will he join the party? We don't know. But the possibility remains. And so, they have a banquet where everyone is welcome anyway, just in case.

I don't know everyone and everything you have lost, including the things you may have lost to neglect. And you don't know everyone and everything I have lost, including those things lost to neglect. But we are still part of one body.

Will we get some of those things and people and relationships back? We don't know. But the possibility remains for at least some of them. And so, we have a banquet where everyone is welcome anyway, just in case.