

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
September 11, 2022
Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28
Psalm 14
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

The Epic Four-Part Journey

What happens to you when you realize you have lost something?

Do you have a predictable pattern of reactions or responses?

Do you swear first and then try to retrace your steps mentally or physically to the last time and place you know you had what's gone missing?

Do you feel, upon noticing the loss, a sinking feeling, perhaps even a bit of panic depending on how consequential or expensive or precious the lost thing is?

Today we hear two of Jesus' three parables about things which are lost from the fifteenth chapter of Luke. It's been called "the lost chapter of Luke" because it's all about lost things. Today we heard the lost sheep and the lost coin.

Back in March, on the 27th, during Lent, we heard the third of the three "lost" parables from this fifteenth chapter: the parable of the lost son.

The parable of the lost son, more commonly called the parable of the prodigal son, concludes with an ambiguous ending. The younger son has returned from being far away and been welcomed home by the father. The elder son has returned from working in the fields to find a party going on in his younger brother's honor. The father has invited the elder son, the one whom he has lost through neglect, to come on and join the party. As the story ends, we don't know whether he will accept the invitation to the banquet or not.

Our two parables today, however, the lost sheep and the lost coin, have happy endings. One of a hundred sheep goes missing, is sought for and found, and the owner calls for others to come and celebrate with him. Similarly, one of ten coins goes missing, is sought for and found, and the owner calls for others to come and celebrate with her.

These two parables follow the same pattern. Upon realizing the one sheep or the one coin is missing, the owners embark on a search. The realization that something is missing, something is wrong, is a *summons* to take action.

In both cases, the *search* for the sheep and the search for the coin take intention and diligence: the lost thing isn't found immediately.

Then, ultimately, in both cases, the lost thing is discovered: the search is successful. The owner experiences relief, even joy, to have the lost thing restored.

And then, in both cases, the person reunited with their lost thing returns to share the joy with a *community celebration*.

In the briefest terms, these two parables go like this: Uh oh. Where is it? Yay, I found it! Come rejoice with me!

Summons. Search. Discovery. Return to the community.

They are ancient parts and follow a very ancient and widespread pattern we see repeated in many different forms across the world's literatures. Joseph Campbell among others has identified these as the four parts of the hero's or heroine's journey.

First, there's always a precipitating event; something happens that brings about a change, raises awareness of an issue or problem, that serves as a call to action or summons.

Then, second, the person taking action, often in the form of taking some kind of journey, search, faces all manner of difficulties, obstacles, trials, and tribulations; it isn't all smooth sailing.

Third, the hero or heroine, often when at the point of despair and ready to give up the whole thing, experiences some new discovery or learning or revelation, and the response to that is exhilaration and joy.

Fourth, the person returns to community with what they have learned or discovered or experienced and shares that gift of discovery with others.

In the case of both our parables today, the person who found the sheep and the person who found a coin share a party with their friends and neighbors.

In many other cases, the person returning from their search or journey shares newfound wisdom with their community. In other words, they return to their community and deepen their service to others in a profound way.

If a person begins a journey after receiving a summons, then endures trials and obstacles, tribulations, even suffering, then receives a gift and experiences joy but ultimately does not share what they have learned or received with others, they halt the

process; they stifle the story. They miss the point.

By now you've heard me reference the work of author and scholar Alexander John Shaia a number of times. Dr Shaia makes the case that oftentimes the Church as a whole and we Christians individually have focused on the first three of these steps or phases. We have experienced a call to action, a summons that somehow something has changed or must change. We have then embarked upon a process of discovery that usually involves obstacles, suffering, perhaps some trial and error. And then, miraculously, just when we thought we would only ever feel despair for the rest of our lives, something breaks through and we have been, in the words of C. S. Lewis, "surprised by joy."

All of these things are well and good and as they should be. Our problem, in Dr Shaia's estimation, is that too often we have tried to sustain the joy of discovery, the mountaintop experience of exhilaration; we want to stay in that "Jesus is my boyfriend" stage and neglect the fourth and crucial step: sharing the gift, the joy, the new learning with the community and expending the gift and ourselves in service to others.

This four-fold pattern really is all over the place. We see it echoed in today's second reading from 1 Timothy.

The Apostle Paul, our patron, as a very well-bred and well-educated Pharisee named Saul, hears about the Jesus movement. The very idea of this outrageous movement serves as a summons to action for him.

He seeks to stamp it out. He goes from place to place—this is his search, his quest—with no thought to the cost or personal sacrifice, he persecutes and kills Christians.

Then on the road to Damascus, he is blinded by a dazzling light and instructed by a heavenly voice: "I am Jesus, whom you persecute." This is Saul's big gift of insight that turns him into Paul.

And then, after following instructions to proceed to Damascus and wait until his sight returns, what does he do? Does he try to maintain the wonderfully terrible ecstasy, the terribly wonderful high of encountering the risen Christ in bright lights and heavenly voice on the road?

No. He spends the rest of his life in service to communities of fellow Christians, the very people whom he had been persecuting. Indeed, he gives his life and his full measure of devotion to Jesus the Christ and those who would follow him. Paul dies a martyr's death, but his life, which is certainly no walk in the park after his dramatic conversion and experience of joy, is worth living because it was filled with vocation.

and purpose that fit him just right.

Summons. Search. Discovery. And then? What comes next? All four parts are crucial.

Dr Shaia sees the four gospels as each dealing with one of these parts or stages. The crucial question for Matthew's community is, "How do we face change?": the summons. The pressing question for Mark's community is, "How do we move through suffering?": making the journey. For John's community, the key question is, "How do we receive joy?": the gift. And, for Luke's community, the overarching question is, "How do we mature in service?"

As we continue in this year, Year C in the Revised Common Lectionary, Luke is our companion. And as we continue to walk Luke's road of riches in the season after Pentecost, we continue to ask the service question: "How do we mature in service?" What forms should our service to the community of St Paul's and the community of Key West and the Lower Keys take?

Today's two gospel parables have happy endings. The owners of the sheep and the coin celebrate with their communities. We, too, in a few minutes will celebrate with this our community as we celebrate the Eucharist.

And, poignantly, on this day, we remember that communities mourn as well as celebrate. We hold in our hearts the memory of the 2,977 people who died in the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the hundreds more who have died since then from injuries and illnesses resulting from the attacks. We remember the people of the United Kingdom and particularly our siblings in the Church of England and the Scottish Episcopal Church as they mourn the passing of Queen Elizabeth II, defender of the faith for 70 years.

And in this month of September designated National Suicide Prevention Month, we remember all those who have died by their own hand. On average, 17 veterans every day. On average, one active-duty service member every day. We remember all those who have died by their own hand and all those who mourn them and love them. Veterans, service members, clergy, family members, co-workers, friends.

May the souls of all of these and the souls of all the departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. And may our lives of purpose and service pay worthy tribute to their memories.