

PROPER 19 C

Luke 15:1-10

Divine Obsession

We have today's familiar gospel about a sheep and a coin.

Now, right at the beginning, let me tell you up front

that the focus of both these parables is not on the sheep or the coin.

But on the Shepherd, the housekeeper, and the Father –

all three being the same seemingly obsessed figure we call God.

That having been said, let's detour to take a look at

some of the intriguing biblical background,

beginning with that dinner party where these stories were first told.

The Pharisees were fuming. But these Pharisees were not scandalized that Jesus was not observing food purity regulations.

They didn't care about that.

Rather, in ancient times, it was understood that likes eats with likes;

that is to say, meals were a way of celebrating group cohesion.

The Pharisees were upset then because Jesus was identifying with obvious sinners and extending membership in his Kingdom to them.

And, what was worse they observed, he wasn't even asking them to make restitution – especially those notoriously corrupt tax collectors who by all accounts should restore their extorted money.

Not that Jesus was indifferent to that,

but that was not the point at the moment. The point was

that by choosing to eat with them at all Jesus was, as we say,

making a statement. He was saying that sinners who heeded and needed him, regardless for the moment if they repented or made restitution, would be included in the call to the Kingdom of God.

“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

That upset the Pharisees:

Jesus's guest list, his eating buddies, his roll call, not food etiquette.

Second, I can't say let this pass by:

you shouldn't miss Jesus's implied insult to the Pharisees.

Looking them straight in the eye, he begins,

“What man among you having a hundred Sheep...”

This zinger is lost on us, but think of it:

Jesus is inviting the proud Pharisees to imagine themselves as lowly shepherds.

“How nice,” we think.

That's because we have been raised on romanticized Christmas cards and think shepherds are adorable.

But in reality shepherds in Jesus time were as popular as child molesters.

They were thought to be dishonest and thieving,

Poaching on other people's lands, stealing their sheep.

They were scum.

To ask the Pharisees, then, to imagine themselves as shepherds is like asking the governing board of the ACLU

to imagine themselves as traditional Christians.

But let's move on to the parables themselves.

The first parable of the lost sheep assumes the common custom
of several shepherds caring for a large flock,
so leaving the ninety-nine in the care of others
to search for the lost one was sensible and expected.

The main focus of the story, however, is the effort of the shepherd.

He would have to traverse over craggy hillsides and deep ravines,
rocks and stones, and search dangerous caves,
all the while keeping an eye open for predators.

And finally, to carry back a sixty – or seventy-five-pound sheep
on one's shoulder over such ground is no small thing.

The point of the story is the exhausting effort, the drive, the sacrifice,
the dedication, the passion of the shepherd for one lost sheep.

Keep that in mind.

The second parable of the woman of the lost coin is a variation
on the Shepherd story.

Once again, notice, the emphasis is on
the great effort the woman expands to find it.

I want to remind you that houses in the first century were dark.

They had small high windows and very little light.

A woman has to use up expensive precious oil to search.

Moreover, floors were packed dirt and had cracks and corners

making seeing very difficult. Yet, she looked and looked.

Again, the point is the enormous amount of energy
she spends in searching. Are you starting to get the picture?

I tell you, whenever I hear these parables,

I think of Francis Thompson's famous and memorable poem.

It centers around this very theme of divine pursuit.

He called it, fittingly, ***“The Hound of Heaven.”***

In the poem, he compares Jesus to a Bloodhound

who won't let go of the trail no matter what it cost him

even as he, the poet, slipping into drugs and alcoholism

and all kinds of evil, flees him and leads him on a merry chase. He writes:

I fled him – Jesus, the Hound – I fled him down

the nights and down the days;

I fled him down the arches of the years;

I fled him down the Labyrinth ways

Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears

I hid from him...

...From his strong feet that followed, followed after.

But with unhurrying chase

And unperturbed pace,

Deliberate speed, majestic instance

They beat....

At the end of the poem, the poet, lying sick and exhausted on the ground
in a dirty alley, sees Christ,

The Hound of Heaven, standing, panting over him.

The tireless Hound of Heaven has finally cornered his prey.

The Hound of Heaven is none other

than the shepherd, the woman, and the prodigal Father, if you will.

I think, when I hear these parables, of how many people waste their time
trying to earn forgiveness and reconciliation. They plot and plan.

How can I get back with God, what steps must I take?

Do I begin with prayer? Do I go see a priest?

These parables tell us: stop trying to earn reconciliation.

Just abandon yourself to God's searching mercy.

God is seeking you more than you are seeking God.

so **"here I am as I am"** is all one can say, or need say.

This Gospel is indeed a deep,

profound revelation about an obsessed God.

Let me end with a little biblical insight on this very point.

In ancient times, the number ten and a hundred

were symbolic numbers. denoting completeness.

That is why the shepherd simply had to leave the 99

to find the single lost one, because otherwise his flock

would not be complete and that was intolerable.

So too with the woman.

It wasn't the amount of the coin that mattered.

It was that things weren't right with only nine coins.

They weren't complete. Something was off center.

And also we might include the Father:

In the prodigal son story. the household was incomplete

with one of its members missing,

and that was driving him to distraction.

Thus, these parables seem to be depicting God

as anxious as the shepherd, the housekeeper, and the father

that all should be just right, complete,

and imply that God's a nervous wreck until they are.

That's what makes these parables, in the last analysis, mind-blowing

stories about God's. passion – or shall we say “**obsession**”? –

for you and for me.

It is, when you think of it, and overwhelming and humbling thought,

and, I would add, a motive for surrender. Amen.