

Luke 15:1-10 (NRSV)

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

(Mt 18.10—14)

15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ 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.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

⁸ “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Family Values

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

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Text: *Luke 15:1-10*

It was a dry season in Judea. I don't mean the weather, either, though the weather was surely dry, as it almost always is. But what I mean is that our spirits were dry. Like the old prophet Ezekiel put it, we were a valley of dried bones.

It hadn't always been that way. At least the stories we told ourselves over and over said it hadn't been. Once, a long, long time ago, when forbears first passed this way, there was promise and expectation. In the days of Abraham and Isaac the promises were real. You could touch them. Now we had memories. "A wandering Aramean was my father," we would recite, and we would remember Abraham, who talked with God and heard that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. And Moses, Moshe we called him, who also spoke with God and guided us to the land of milk and honey. And David, who sang us songs of victory. And Solomon who built the most magnificent temple the world had ever seen.

In those days our spirits were fresh and full of life. Ah yes, we remember. But the memories are of so long ago. And we are old and tired and dried up now. We remember kingdoms, but our kingdom was long ago, and even then but for a day. Assyria then Babylon, Alexander then Caesar. For a thousand years we have known nothing of the days we remember; we have known but bondage and hardship. We sit on the street, wrinkled old men telling old men's stories to one another of the day when it was all different. To pass the time we pretend we believe them, and we let ourselves daydream. But it is only an escape, stories to set aside our sorrow for a brief moment.

Not long ago, some of the old men began to say that a new breeze was blowing. They said that a freshening breeze was coming out of the Galilee. They said it like the breezes that blow the leaves before the rain comes. They said I would feel it, too, I saw the man who was out in the desert. I scoffed at them. New breezes are ill winds in my experience.

I confess, though, that I was intrigued. My wizened old friends were not easily fooled. They were wary of the next breeze blowing into town. They also knew the dangers. But they kept saying, "He isn't dried up. He's alive," they said. But they said that he wasn't on fire either. We had all had our fill of those who had fire in their eyes and said by God's power they were going to overthrow Caesar. "If God parted the sea and crushed Pharaoh's horses," these zealots would say, "would God not do the same to Rome's legions?" We had all come to understand that it was better to be dried up than to be on fire. For the fire would turn on you, and we would be but ashes in the breeze in an instant. Anyone who thought God would crush Rome had to explain to me why God hadn't crushed Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander and the millennium of generals that came before Caesar.

My friend Matthias assured me that this freshening breeze we heard about was not on fire, but he was not dried up, either. He was alive. That's what Matthias and the others said. There was something solid and alive about him, they said. He told stories of faith that grows like

a mustard seed. “Blessed are the poor and the poor in spirit,” he said. In one place he fed 5 thousand people with a few pieces of bread and fish. In another, people who had been lame for years and could not walk got up and carried their beds away with them. Matthias said, “O come, Joshua, let this breeze set our dried up shells to fluttering. For the rain and renewal it portends is coming soon.”

As I said, I had my doubts from the very beginning. “When you hear about something that’s too good to be true,” I told Matthias, and anyone else who would listen to me, “it is too good to be true. Mark my word,” I told Matthias, “he won’t live up to all the hype. He’ll be as flawed and disappointing as all the rest. Better to tell stories and let this thing lie.”

Matthias said I was just a dried up old olive pit, and I would see. But I was right. I turned out to be right. And how could I not be. As far as I could see from the beginning, there were three options for any Jew in our situation, and only three. You could be a fiery zealot and go down in flames. You could be a dried up olive pit, like Matthias says I am, and sit around telling harmless stories of the days of yore, fairy tales you don’t really believe, but which pass the days without causing trouble. Or third, you could play the game with Rome, become their puppet, do their dirty work, and make a few dollars for your loyal service.

That last is what the tax collectors did. The tax collectors did the dirty work of taking our money to fund the very institutions and people that ruled over us. They took our money, and they used it to fund the very despots who ruled over us. Have you ever seen a Roman coin? We had to pay taxes with our money, but we had to use Roman currency. Under any circumstances that would be salt enough in our wounds. But if you’ve seen Roman coins, you know that the money they made us pay the taxes with was imprinted with images of our subjugation. The coins always had the emperor on them, and the inscription said he was God, already more than any faithful Jew could stomach. But then, stamped right into the metal, where our eyes were forced to look at them, where our hands were forced to touch them, were the very scenes of our subjugation. Victory over Judea it would say, and it would show us handing over our very children as tribute, or our people bound to a tree, or being trampled by soldiers. We were forced to pay for our own subjugation with our own money in coinage that celebrated our defeats and heartaches. So, now, you can understand how we felt about the tax collectors. The tax collectors were those among us, our own people, who were willing to sell their souls a little Roman money. They were willing to take our money for Rome and rub salt into our wounds while doing it.

I had warned Matthias that this man who he said was a breath of fresh air would not live up to expectations. And I was right. Hardly had he arrived in town and we heard, “The tax collectors and the sinners gather around him. And he eats with them.” One of them, a tax collector, was even an official disciple in his group. I told Matthias, “See. If it sounds too good to be true, it is too good to be true. He kisses up to the tax collectors, for crying out loud. Like I said, Matthias, we have three choices. You can be a zealot and crash and burn. You can be a traitor to our people like the tax collectors. Or you can be what you called dried up. Of the three I’ll take dried up.”

Matthias said, “I know, I know, Joshua. When I saw him with those people, I said to myself, ‘I have to admit that my old friend Joshua was right. This man was too good to be true.’ In fact, that’s just what I said to him. I walked right up to him and said, ‘My friend Matthias said you’d be either a zealot or a traitor, and he was right. Anybody who hangs out with tax

collectors is in Rome's pocket. I suppose can understand selling out to Rome, but why say you are something new and different.”

Matthias told me that he expected the man to insult him. Matthias figured he gave the guy a piece of his mind, the guy would make some nasty remark in return, and then Matthias would leave before the whole thing escalated.

But the guy didn't even raise his voice. He said to Matthias, “If you were a shepherd with a hundred sheep and you lost one of them, would you not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until you find it? Or if you were a widow with ten coins, and you lost one of them, wouldn't you search high and low for it? And if you found the lost sheep or the lost coin, wouldn't you rejoice? Well that's how God feels when one sinner returns home.”

Matthias told me, “That really got me thinking.” He said that he thought to himself, “I'm not really sure what he meant. I don't know, would a shepherd leave 99 sheep to find one stray? But the thing I realized was that here was a man who was eating and talking to tax collectors, but that didn't mean he approved of what they were doing. They were lost sheep, and he hoped they would come back into the fold.

“You know Joshua,” said Matthias, “I never thought of it that way. The Romans and the tax collectors, well, I certainly thought of them as lost alright. But that always meant that I dreamed about them getting punished. I never said it our loud too much. Too risky. And so I sat around, an old dried out man telling old dried out stories about the days when we were in charge and we could make people like that pay. That's what I dreamed about. I dreamed about making them pay. You bet I did.

“And then there's this guy who says they are lost sheep. Shepherds are funny people. They actually love their sheep. A lot of people think sheep are stupid. Maybe they are. But when you sit with them day and night, week after week, well, you get to know each one. They're like family. There's a bond, you know what I mean? There's a bond even for the one that is always wandering off and getting into trouble. And the shepherd doesn't think, ‘I need to punish that one because it's bad.’ Well maybe he thinks that sometimes. But in the end he thinks, ‘Even though I have 99 other sheep, I care too much about this other one to just let it keep straying where it will get eaten up by a beast. And even if it's sometimes against his better judgment, the shepherd will try to find the lost sheep and bring it back.

“So, you see, Joshua,” Matthias told me, “I think this guy may actually be the real thing, a real breath of fresh air, something new. I never thought of loving tax collectors. I never thought of loving them and hoping they would change. I had just written them off.”

Matthias looked me in the eye, and he said these words. And I have to admit, I am still rolling them over in my mind. He said, “You know, Joshua, this man has got me thinking if the reason we're all dried up is really because we aren't in charge of the promised land like the stories of the old days. I wonder if we're dried up is because we've come to believe that we're supposed to hate when we're actually supposed to love, even the tax collectors.”

It's giving me a lot to think about. It's hard to swallow, that's for certain. But the more I think about it, I think the guy might be right. I'm going out to listen to him again tomorrow, I think. Funny, I seem to feel a freshening breeze today. Do you feel it, too? Oh well, it's probably just my imagination. Or, maybe not. Anyway, I'm going out to hear him tomorrow.

I'd love it if you came along. Yes, I sure would love it if you came along. Amen.