



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea

*The Episcopal Church  
in Destin, Florida*

THE FOURTEENTH  
SUNDAY AFTER  
PENTECOST

September 11, 2022

A Homily by the Rev. James J. Popham

This morning's reading from the Gospel according to Luke has been called "the very distilled essence of the good news which Jesus came to tell."<sup>1</sup> Why? In two very familiar parables, Jesus answers the question.

How many times have we heard the parable of the lost sheep, a story that would relate easily to his audience of tax collectors and sinners? Everyone knew how dangerous it could be to be a shepherd. Sheep could wander off the narrow rough terrain of Judea, which was surrounded on two sides by cliffs. Missteps in the dark could lead to tragedy. And when darkness was settling in and the sheep and shepherds were coming in for the night, a missing sheep meant a shepherd would stay behind and search for him. That is what shepherds did. No one would expect any less from them.

And no one would expect any different behavior from the woman who lost one of her 10 silver coins. The coin might have been necessary for her sustenance. Or it might have had sentimental value as one of the coins of her wedding headdress, a custom well-known to Jesus' audience.

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay

No one would have been surprised that she lit a lamp, something necessitated by the likely lack of windows in her home, and swept a dirt floor that was covered with straw, an easy place to lose sight of a coin – and a hard place to find much of anything. Yet, the listeners knew that the woman would spare no effort to find the coin, just as the shepherd would consider no risk too great to find the lost sheep.

Now put these parables in the context of the beliefs and practices of the Pharisees who were grumbling that Jesus dined and socialized with sinners. After all, Pharisees even would have tried to avoid doing any business with those they perceived to be sinners, and they certainly never would have invited them to their homes or been a guest in theirs. That would have been strictly forbidden in the cobweb of petty rules they had spun from the Law. Those who failed to keep these detailed rules were neither to be saved nor redeemed nor even tolerated. They were to be obliterated. And that informed and revealed their vision of God, a God who would rejoice in heaven at the destruction of sinners. And that hardly was the God Jesus spoke of in his parables.

Last week Jo spoke to slavery. And one of the more prominent early opponents of slavery was John Newton. He had been a captain of slave ships and investor in the slave trade, but his heart was turned, and he became a staunch abolitionist and later a priest in the Church of England. He would write the iconic hymn *Amazing Grace* with its immortal verse, “I once was lost, but now I am found.” Those few words encapsulate what Jesus was saying in the parables that called out the Pharisees and their understanding of God.

John Newton did not find his own way. As he acknowledged, he “was found” by God. The lamb that strayed in Jesus’ parable did not just find his own way and wander back to the flock. The lost coin, so precious to the woman, did not suddenly appear from under the straw on the floor. The shepherd searched for the one lost sheep. The woman swept the house and searched carefully. And God touched John Newton’s heart in the midst of a perilous moment at sea.

This is what Jesus was saying. God is no platonic God who created the world and stepped back to watch what would happen. Jesus in these parables is telling the Pharisees – and us, today – that God takes an interest in us...and will not always wait around for us to find our way on our own. We are creatures of a God of grace, a God of free love. And a God who is interested, involved, and insistent in our lives. A God who is neither passive nor merely reactive. A God who is active. A God who takes the initiative

Luke tells us that God is the shepherd who goes after lost sheep. God is the creator that goes after sinners. We all are sinners. But we also are the trophies of God’s creation, the invaluable silver coins hidden in the straw on the floor. And God will pursue us relentlessly when we stray and vigorously seek us out when we seem to be lost.

But admitting that God created and loves and values us and that God will act and get involved accordingly leaves a lot of room for interpretation. In the broadest sense, God’s involvement in the world is apparent, as we remember in our Eucharistic prayers that mention:

[T]he calling of Israel to be ... the people  
chosen to reveal God to the world;

The ever-evolving covenantal relationship  
with Israel;

The prophets and sages who revealed the  
Law;

Jesus, born of a woman, who lived as one of  
us; and

the Holy Spirit ... to complete his work in the  
world, and to bring to fulfillment the  
sanctification of all.

We might add such obvious other things as the Bible, the inspired  
Word of God, which we assert contains all things necessary for  
salvation. Or even the Church in its broadest meaning, with its  
tradition and community of discernment and mutual support.

All that is well and good in terms of God's involvement with creation  
and humanity as a whole or at least with particular nations or  
peoples. But what about us? Do we believe God has a plan? Well,  
God has revealed a plan for creation in so many ways that  
culminated in the person of Jesus Christ, who has shown us how to  
behave to carry that plan forward. But does God have a plan for each  
of us? That is an intellectually challenging question.

It seems implausible in a world of seven billion people and a cosmos  
with billions of stars. Maybe even impossible. And certainly  
incomprehensible. Admittedly, we have so many thousand  
interactions with our environment every day that coincidence could  
explain a lot of good things that happen to us. So wrapping our  
heads around a God who would search us out and take us in can be  
difficult.

The only satisfying answer I can recommend involves looking to our experience in life.

Jo and I have been rewatching past episodes of the very popular television series *Yellowstone*. Now, honestly, in the words of one former canon to the ordinary when discouraging us from applying for positions at certain churches, the family portrayed in the series, “are not nice people.” Nonetheless, they have their moments, which can offer opportunities for reflection on such questions as these.

At the end of one episode in season three, the patriarch of the family, John Dutton, recalling with his son one of the tragedies of their lives, says:

Makes you wonder the point of it all. ... Like to believe there's a plan to it all, but I don't see a plan.

And his son replies, “That's just 'cause we're inside it, Dad.” A good answer.

Are we so caught up inside our day-to-day lives, in the chances and changes of this life, that we are like John Dutton and John Newton, blind to God's activity in our lives? Are we too close or too closed-minded to see or admit that God will not leave us lost or untended?

God gave us memory, reason, and skill. And that includes experience gained by sight and sound and touch and smell and the ability to process, understand, and evaluate our experiences. And that my dear friends in Christ, is the best approach and best evidence we can embrace to see God's activity not only in the world, but in our individual lives.

Years ago in a galaxy far removed from this world, Washington, D.C., I knew a gentleman named Squire Rushnell. He was at the time the Vice President of Standards and Practices for the ABC Television Network. He also would include among his accomplishments *Schoolhouse Rock* on ABC. Later in life he wrote a book that now resides on our bookshelves called "When God Winks." He defines a God Wink as:

An event or personal experience, often identified as coincidence, so astonishing that it could only have come from divine origin.

His publisher, Simon and Shuster says that

After reading *When God Winks*, you'll learn to recognize coincidences in your life for what they truly are: an act of God's enduring love.

His stories have been the basis of a God winks segment on the NBC *Today Show* and have provided the plots for four movies on the Hallmark Channel, the ultimate antidote to the 24-hour news cycle.

Could I have mentioned this unless my life included too many supposed God winks to ignore or relegate to mere coincidence?

I know I am a sinner, no less lost at times than the straying sheep. And I know I am valued by God, that I mean something to God like the woman's lost coin. And I appreciate that the shepherd went after one lost sheep. And I see that woman seeking one lost coin.

But, mainly, looking back at my life, I cannot deny that God has winked at me, probably, more often than I know. And if that is not good news, maybe the best news, I do not know what is.