

“Two traveling angels stopped to spend the night in the home of a wealthy family. The members of the family were rude and refused to let the angels stay in the mansion’s guest room. Instead, they were given a small space in the cold basement. As they made their bed on the hard floor, the older angel saw a hole in the wall and repaired it. When the younger angel asked why, the older angel replied. ‘Things aren’t always what they seem.’

“The next night the heavenly pair came to rest at the house of a very poor—but very hospitable—farmer and his wife. After sharing what little food they had, the couple let the angels sleep in their bed where they could have a good night’s rest. When the sun came up the next morning, the angels found the farmer and his wife in tears. Their only cow, whose milk had been their sole income, lay dead in the field.

“The younger angel was infuriated and asked the older angel how he could have let this happen. ‘The first man had everything, yet you helped him,’ she accused. ‘The second family had little but was willing to share everything and you let the cow die.’ ‘Things aren’t always what they seem,’ the older angel replied. ‘When we stayed in the basement of the mansion, I noticed there was gold stored in that hole in the wall. Since the owner was so obsessed with greed and unwilling to share his good fortune, I sealed the wall so he wouldn’t find it. Then last night as we slept in the farmer’s bed, the angel of death came for his wife. I gave him the cow instead.’”

Things aren’t always what they seem. And that’s a good point for us to remember when we hear the parables of Jesus, especially those that seem simple and straightforward like today’s parables of lost-ness. Jesus’ parables are about how God works, and how God deals with us. They are full of little twists and turns and details we may not notice at first. Today we can look at these parables and with very little effort, reading only on the surface, infer that both of the scenarios we’ve heard are far-fetched and improbable but nonetheless represent God’s desire to find lost things and to celebrate when they are found.

Yesterday morning I heard an interview with one of the construction workers who were brought to Ground Zero to remove the rubble after the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers fifteen years ago today. The man said that in the days immediately following the attack, he and his co-workers were frequently approached by people who showed them pictures and asked if their loved ones had been seen. One who particularly stood out to him was a woman with a picture of her son. He had to tell her that he hadn’t seen the son, and then watched as she went to ask someone else the same question, unwilling to give up on her search for her lost child. “It hit me,” the man said, “that she was my mother. My mother would have been right here looking for me, and she would have searched for me for as long as it took.” According to today’s parable, God is just like that woman, looking for the lost among the rubble of life’s disappointments, and separations, and troubles.

And that’s important for us to know. But to gain the full lesson of these parables, we must first look at what caused Jesus to tell them in the first place. At the beginning of the passage, we hear the Pharisees and the scribes complaining that the tax collectors and sinners are coming to hear what Jesus says, and that Jesus is welcoming them. Our temptation is to zoom right by that part of the passage, jump into the search for the lost sheep and the lost coin, and imagine how we fit into the parables, either as the person who was lost then found, or as the one who searched and found that which was lost.

Realistically, we probably are a better fit with the Pharisees and scribes, who have been so maligned in the Gospels that they are the last people we want to be associated with. But in truth, we are like them, whether we want to admit it or not. We have a bazillion rules about how we are to be the church, everything from the Canons and Constitution of the Episcopal Church, to the traditions

and practices that for us define faith, to the guidelines for the ministries and positions in our parish, which, by the way, fill up a notebook. And be clear, there are repercussions for those who ignore or break the rules, even if that's just being talked about by the rule keepers! I often wonder if we are smothering the flames of the Holy Spirit with our rules and guidelines and expectations about the correct way to do things.

Hear what Jesus says in the parable of the lost sheep: "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 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." In a sermon posted on The Episcopal Church website, The Rev. Charles Hoffacker wonders if Jesus delivers that line with a slight smile on his lips; if he could mean that "those ninety-nine righteous persons simply *believe* they need no repentance, when, in fact, they need it as much as the one identified as a sinner." Hoffacker continues, "An alternative exists that is found close to the heart of the gospel. To recognize it, we must turn away from two misleading notions: The first is that repentance, conversion—call it what you will—is, at most, a once-in-a-lifetime event; the second is that a conventional lifestyle can replace radical obedience to God's will."¹

The church has become an institution that serves the righteous. But that is not why we were called into God's kingdom! These parables of lost-ness tell us very plainly that the lost sheep and the lost coin did not find themselves. They are found by someone who is looking for them. We Christians, who presume to be the righteous, are called to find the lost, and bring them into the sheepfold of the church, so that they, with us, can be comforted, forgiven, and loved by the one who made us all. As the church, we are called to rejoice for them and with them, by welcoming them with open hearts, open minds, and open arms into the Body of Christ.

In the words of the Apostle Paul, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

So it was, so it is, so it will be. *Amen.*

¹ Synthesis, Year C, Proper 19 – Tradition, September 11, 2016.