Lost and Found
Luke 15:1-10

Chapter 15 of Luke's gospel contains three of Jesus' best-loved parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son. And even if you don't know much about the Christian faith, you may at least have heard of one of these stories. And together they form a wonderful trilogy on God's grace in rescuing and joy in saving. And next week we're going to look at the Prodigal Son, but today we're going to look at Jesus' Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin.

Reading: Luke 15:1-10

Now, if you're a parent, I can almost guarantee that you don't like it when your children grumble. But forget about children, parent or not, think about your own life, because no matter how often we do it, very little good ever comes from grumbling, does it? Except here, something wonderful does – but not in the lives of the grumblers. Look at v2, where Luke tells us, 'And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled.' And it's their grumbling that provokes Jesus to tell these stories. The question is, what could make Pharisees and scribes, the good, morally upright people of the day, who supposedly loved, and taught the Bible, grumble? Well, Luke tells us in v1: 'the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]…. And the Pharisees and the Scribes grumbled."

You see, the problem is that tax collectors and sinners weren't exactly high up on the average religious person's list of The-People-I'd-Most-Like-to-Have-Dinner-With. After all, think how Nazi collaborators were viewed in occupied France during, and after the Second World War, and how they were shamed and publically humiliated – and that's how people thought about tax collectors - collaborators with the occupying Roman forces. Or think about the financial melt-down of a few years back and how big-bonus bankers were viewed at the time - and that's how these tax-collectors were seen, as they grew rich at other's expense. And then there's this group Luke calls 'sinners,' people who were living lives unfaithful to God's laws, and so were deemed to have excluded themselves from good company and moral society and forfeited any possible relationship with God.

And so these two groups were despised and outcasts. They were the kind of people you'd cross the street to avoid. And yet, here they are coming to Jesus.

Okay, but why are they coming, well Luke tells us: v1, they were drawing near 'to hear him.'

Now, if you look at what comes just before this passage, you'll see that Jesus has just been spelling out the cost of following him: that you've got to love Him above every other relationship, even above your own life; that you've got to take up your cross – and be willing to die to anything else, for Him. And then Jesus closes out Chapter 14 by saying (v35) "He who has ears to hear let him hear" and the next thing Luke tells us is that these tax collectors and sinners were coming to do just that - the very ones the Pharisees looked down on had ears to hear.

So why did these people, of all people, draw near to Jesus to *hear* him, while the religious people stood there grumbling *about* him? Because they knew their

need, didn't they? They know that they're excluded, that they're outsiders; they feel that everyday, and yet, in Jesus they saw and heard something deeply attractive. And even though it was a call to come and die, even though it challenged them to the core of what it meant to be them, they came to hear him.

You see, think back to the parable of the great banquet last week. The master sends out his servant to bring in the poor and the crippled and the blind and the lame. And here are the tax collectors and sinners responding to that call to come to the feast. Because just like these tax collectors, you can be rich, can't you, but know you're desperately poor on the inside. You can be physically fit, in all senses of the word; you can leap in and out of bed with a succession of sexual partners, and know you are crippled and lame on the inside. You can have perfect 20/20 vision, you can be one of the world's beautiful people, and know you're among the blind and the lepers Jesus is calling to come. And knowing that's who they were, they came.

But it wasn't just that they *came* that got the Pharisees grumbling. It's how Jesus treated them. Look at v2: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." *This man.* They can't bring themselves to mention Jesus' name. "This man". And their problem? He's prepared to share a meal with *them*.

Now, again, remember the parables from last week, and how God invites sinners to come join his banquet, and enter the feast. And here is Jesus receiving sinners and eating with them. And in this culture, to eat with someone was to accept them, it was to recognize them, it was to say, you're my friend. And Jesus is doing that for the very ones religious people despised. That's why they grumbled!

And in response, Jesus tells three parables, and from these first two, I want you to see three simple truths: lost, found and rejoicing.

Lost

Now, when someone says something good about you, how do you feel? You *feel* good on the inside, don't you? But what if someone insults you? Then you feel just a little different. And in this first parable Jesus calls people like these tax collectors and sinners – people who have chosen money and comfort or the pleasures of this world before God – so people like you and me - sheep. And if you know anything at all about sheep, that's not exactly the highest complement you can pay someone, is it! I mean, if someone called you a lion, you'd pretend to be all humble and go, 'well, maybe I do have some lion-ish characteristics about me.' But to be called a sheep is something very different.

Because sheep are not exactly the brightest animal in the pack, are they? Head down, they go from one patch of grass to the next. And what are they thinking of as they munch? They're thinking, Grass. And they don't give any thought to where their stomachs are taking them, provided there's grass. And the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, so they get their heads stuck in the fence. And there's grass on that narrow cliff edge over there, so that's where they go, and get stuck, or fall off and die. And there's grass on the other side of that

bog, so they get stuck in the bog. And they're diseased and manky, and if you go walking where they farm sheep, you frequently come across their bones.

When the girls were younger, we once spent a week in a holiday cottage on a sheep farm in the West of England. And the farmer had once been a successful city banker, but he'd taken earlier retirement to fulfill his dream of becoming a sheep farmer. And 5, or however many years later, you could tell he regretted that decision. And as the girls were going all goey over the sheep, he could barely conceal his hatred of them – they're so stupid, I spend my day rescuing them.

So when Jesus describes us as sheep, he's not saying, 'you're so nice and fluffy I just want to cuddle you!' He's saying, that we have this in-built tendency to wander, to stray. There's this inner desire to feed our souls on *something,* and that desire draws us away from the sheep-pen. And with the tax-collectors it was their desire for money, and for more – and they would sacrifice society's approval to get it; and with the sinners, it was their desire to be free and to escape the rules, and they risked moral censure to have it.

And so, it's not just that they, and we, are sheep. It's that we're *lost* sheep who have gone off after wrong stuff, because we want to be filled. As Isaiah the prophet says, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one- to his own way.' (Is 53:6). And we need to be found.

But then, in the second parable, Jesus changes the image. There's a woman who has 10 silver coins, 10 drachmas, each worth about a day's wage. And she loses one of them. Now a day's wage is a modest sum, isn't it? It's not nothing, but neither is it a fortune. But like the sheep, it's lost, and because it's lifeless it has absolutely no way of finding itself again.

And so far, the Pharisees wouldn't have had any difficulty with the idea that these sinners are stupid and of little value, would they?. But then comes the punch of the parables: because Jesus says, it's not just that sinful people like them and us are lost, it's also that we're loved, and can be found.

Found

Look at v4-5: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing."

And Jesus says, Any man would do that for a lost sheep, so how much more will God do that for a lost person. In other words, you religious people see these people as diseased, feeding their souls on what eventually destroys them; wandering off from the fold of God's care; and you're right, they have done that. But unlike you, God doesn't leave them there, he goes in search of them. Because they're not just lost, they're loved. And the shepherd goes searching, and the woman goes seeking.

Now, personally, I think it's interesting that Jesus has a woman go looking for the lost coin, and not a man, don't you? Because, I'm ashamed to say that if this was me, there would be much less searching and much more talking: 'Whose moved my coin? I can't find my coin. Someone must have taken my coin. I can't leave my coins anywhere.' But this woman is like Su, and she takes her broom and lights her lamp and gets on her hands and knees and starts searching.

And religious people, who are sure of their own righteousness, might blame and point the finger, but Jesus says God is like a woman on her hands and knees, searching, looking.

Do you remember the events in Thailand and the rescue of those boys and their coach from the flooded cave – and being transfixed by it all? And the feeling of dread that they might have perished, and the tension as the divers went in, and the joy when they were found, and then the elation when they were finally all brought out alive?

And that is what God is like. He is a searching, seeking, saving, rescuing God.

But think about it, that's not the God of other religions, is it? It's not even the god of secular materialism. You see, religion and our secular culture says that you can be forgiven and accepted back, if you earn it, if you prove it by your good behavior, if you conform, if you find yourself and save yourself. But Christianity says something very different. It says that God seeks us out when we're still far away, that he goes in search of lost sinners while we still have our backs turned to him.

It's the God who came in Jesus Christ, who said of himself, 'the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.' (Luke 19:10). And whether you're a 1st or 21st century tax-collector or sinner, if you are a Christian you have been found, and if you're not yet a Christian you can be found, because God loves you so much to search for you.

And look what happens when the shepherd finds the sheep. Verse 5: 'And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders,' and he takes it home. Now, a few weeks back, Su and I were walking along the lake-front and an elderly woman stopped her car alongside us and asked for help, because she was lost. But you'll be glad to know that I didn't sling her over my shoulder and carry her to where she wanted to go – I just gave her directions. But this sheep is too weak to return on its own. So what does the shepherd do? He picks it up and carries it.

You see, being found and being saved is not looking to Jesus as a great teacher, or as a fine moral example, and by doing that you can find yourself, and improve yourself, and save yourself, because now you've got the right directions for life, anymore than the shepherd gives the sheep a map and tells it to find its own way back to the sheep-fold. No. The shepherd launches the rescue, and the shepherd finds the sheep, and the shepherd carries him home on his shoulders. In fact, the shepherd does everything. The sheep just lies there and gets carried. And true

salvation is not about you saving yourself, it's about God coming to your rescue in Christ.

But imagine the struggle as the shepherd pins the sheep down, and ties its legs up, and throws it over his shoulders and jolts his way home. What's the sheep thinking? This shepherd is trying to kill me! And when God is on your case, you might feel exactly the same – everything is going wrong in your life, nothing is working, and you feel constrained, and your options are closing down and you feel your freedom being curtailed, and you think, God, why is this happening to me? If you loved me you wouldn't let this happen. Why are you trying to kill me? But he's not trying to kill you, he's saving you.

Ok, but can Jesus bring sinners and tax-collectors – then and now - home without dismissing the sin, and the wandering away. How can God do that without just saying of sin, 'o that doesn't matter, let's just pretend it didn't happen'? – when sin against God and against others does matter and it did happen. How, in the words of the apostle Paul, can God be both just, and the one who justifies?

Well, listen again to Isaiah 53:6, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.' You see, in Christ, the shepherd became a sheep, he became one of us, he fully identified with us. And at the cross he became that sacrificial lamb. And so the shepherd didn't just carry the sheep, he carried our sin. As John the Baptist saw Jesus and said, 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'. And if a silver coin lost by a woman is of modest value, God gave up His greatest treasure, His beloved Son, his infinite value, to rescue us of far less value, and make us his treasured possession.

And when you understand that, you'll understand joy. Last point then: Lost, found, rejoicing.

Rejoicing

In his book, *The Weight of Glory*, CS Lewis describes the phenomenon of Inner Rings. He says we have this 'inner compulsion to be on the 'inside' – we have this 'need to become a member of the elusive and desirable group'. And this Inner Ring, this group of people who are 'in', exists for exclusion. '*There'd be no fun'* Lewis says, 'if there were no outsiders.' And as a result, Lewis says, 'of all passions,' this 'passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things.'

And one reason religious people reject people they see as sinners is because it makes them feel good. It feels good to have others you can look down on – who are outside, when you're inside. There's a certain joy, an inner 'feeling-better-about-yourself' when you've made it, and others haven't. When you're in and others aren't. When you're better than them.

I mean think how this works in your own life. What is that Inner Ring that you're either in, or want to be in, that gives you a sense of joy, a sense of having made it, a sense of being *in*? And you feel good about yourself *in comparison* to those who

aren't in? Maybe that's your marriage, or family, or position at work, and you feel like you've succeeded where others haven't, and that feels good. Maybe it's your politics, and you feel good because you're liberal and not like those terrible conservatives, or conservative and not like those terrible liberals. And you sense this happy, moral superiority, because you're in the right Ring. Or the left ring! You're in the Gated Community of the Self-righteous.

But Jesus is building a very different kind of community. He's building a community that's based, not on what you have to achieve to be in, but on people who have experienced grace. On people who know they need grace know they don't deserve to be there. Jesus is building a community of the lost who know they've been found. A community marked not by joy at excluding others, but joy at welcoming others.

You see, these parables begin with the Pharisees grumbling, but they both end with overflowing joy, don't they. The shepherd rejoices as he carries his sheep, calling his friends and neighbours, v6, to come and 'rejoice with me'. The woman is so happy to find her coin she calls her friends and neighbours round for a party. And as a friend pointed out to me this week, wouldn't it be wonderfully ironic if she spent more on celebrating with her neighbours that she'd found her coin, than she saved in finding it!

And so, sure, the Pharisees found their joy in their moral superiority. But Jesus is saying there is a far greater joy in grace. And you can find an inner sense of wellbeing, an overflowing happiness, in God's undeserved love and rescue of you and of others. And the reason you can do that is because *God* takes joy in grace.

Look what Jesus says in v7, and notice where the joy is happening: "There will be more joy *in heaven* over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Then v10: "There is joy *before the angels of God* over one sinner who repents." So, the joy is *before*, it's *in front of*, the angels. And what or who is in front of the angels in heaven? Who are they looking at? It's God! God our Heavenly Father rejoices, He takes joy, in lost people being found and coming home. He's the God who rejoices over you with singing.

And Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, and to any of us caught up in the grumbling that comes with self-satisfied self-righteousness: leave your grumbling and come join in God's joy: joy in His redeeming, rescuing grace.

And if you've never experienced that joy, maybe that's because you've never been found. And if you have a dawning realization that you have never been found, and you know that you're lost, you wouldn't have that if the Shepherd wasn't calling your name, if he wasn't seeking you out, so respond to him.

You see, when the Pharisees say, "This man receives sinners and eats with them", they meant it as a complaint. We can take it as a huge encouragement. Because that is what Jesus does! He receives sinners and eats with them.