

Pentecost 14, Lectionary 24 Sunday, September 11, 2021
Luke 15:1-10

You don't need me to fill you in on the details; you know the story as well as I do. It's the one about Myles and Damien Anderson and the James Smith Cree Nation, and Weldon, Saskatchewan. It's the one about Thomas and Carol and Gregory and Gloria and Bonnie and Earl Burns, and Lana and Christian Head, and Robert Sanderson, and Wesley Petterson.

When Jesus talks about a lost sheep he's telling a story about these twelve and their communities. Two boys, Myles and Damien, beloved children of their parents, beloved children of God, and something went off the rails somewhere in their lives, in their community's life, in our country's life... Lost sheep they were. And all those ones who died, in some way they are lost sheep; beloved ones who are now lost to the people who loved them and cared about them. A community in shock, a kind of lost sheep trying to sort out what has happened in just a few days to turn its life upside down.

Jesus isn't really telling a story with a religious lesson. He's just talking about people being lost, and about someone who cares that they're lost and won't stop looking for them. We all know the obvious way to read that story, I think, and we hear it and we know that God, like that shepherd, will look and look for lost sheep until they are gathered home again.

Then Jesus adds another picture of a lost coin, and a woman who searches the house to find it, and we hear a story told of twelve valued and loved and cherished coins, people, lost, and how did that ever happen? There are people and communities of infinite worth, and God, a woman, searching and trying to find and bring back all these treasured ones who have been lost.

Jesus isn't handing out a religious message or a "moral of the story" kind of ending. Jesus is just talking about lost ones – lost sheep, lost coins, lost communities, people wandering dazed or grieving, or people forgotten. And there's someone who cares and who seeks them out and won't stop looking to bring the lost sheep and the scattered flock back together, and to gather up the lost coins and bring them back with great joy.

It is a picture that is somehow about God and us. We can be so lost in so many ways, ways we've gotten ourselves lost and it's our own fault, or ways that we've been lost through no fault of our own or we've just been forgotten or we just don't know where to turn next. And we will be found because the one searching for us – the shepherd, the woman in her home – the one searching for the lost won't stop until they're found.

It's the gospel in a nutshell: God won't stop searching, and God will give anything to find the ones who are lost.

But there's more than one way to read a parable. It's not that one's right and one's wrong. It's just that there's more than one way. So try it this way. Sometimes you and I are not the lost sheep or coin, but instead are the shepherd who lost the sheep in the first place. And when Jesus talks about repentance he's not talking about the sheep repenting. He's talking about the shepherd repenting and paying attention to that sheep again. And when Jesus talks about a lost coin he's not saying that a coin should repent – how does a coin repent? He is talking about the homeowner repenting and looking for what they lost.

Jesus' parable could be calling us to repent – to turn around and to notice and pay attention to the people who are getting lost somehow, just falling through the cracks. To use the language of the parable Jesus tells, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents – over one shepherd who finally notices that someone is missing; over one busy householder who turned around and started looking for someone who was lost. There is more joy in heaven when someone finally begins to notice that there are people who are lost, or alone, or forgotten. And there is a great party in heaven when a community is healed, when the flock is whole again.

The parable is really about this world that God is bringing into being, where everyone is found. Where no one is forgotten. Where a community is healed.

Back on James Smith Cree Nation, the first funeral for the victims was for Damien Sanderson, one of the two suspects in the murders. His wake was held on Wednesday evening, and no one in the community really knew what to expect. Some people wondered if anyone would show up, and rightly so, I guess. Damien's wife, whose name is Skye, was expecting that she would come into an empty hall for her husband's wake and funeral, but she arrived to find the hall packed with people, and the matriarchs of the community had spread a feast, and people remembered someone they all loved. For that time in that place no sheep were lost and no one was forgotten. That's the story Jesus is telling, where the shepherd remembers to look for the sheep, and the flock comes together again. It's this story where no one is forgotten, and the most important thing is that the flock be together and caring for each other. That's the story Jesus tells, about a

wake in a northern town on Wednesday evening.

You don't need me to tell you the details of the other story that we heard this week. On Thursday morning I heard that Queen Elizabeth was failing, and the family were being gathered together, and we all know what "the family have been called together" means. I texted Val to tell her that all that was happening, because I didn't know whether she had heard. About half an hour later the announcement was made that the Queen had died, and I texted Val and said, "The Queen is dead. Long live the King." If you know me well and know that I can be cynical and cranky about wealth and hierarchy and all that sort of thing, you will know that that was a strange text for me to send, because I don't talk that way. And then I hit send, and then I started to cry. That was a surprise. But I guess a lot of people, a lot of us, have responded to the death of the Queen in ways we didn't expect. We just don't have any practice knowing how to act at the death of the Queen.

Do you know what the Queen's very last official communication was? It was issued on Wednesday, a few hours before Skye Sanderson walked into her husband's funeral wake, and only a day before the Queen herself died. Here it is: "I would like to extend my condolences to those who have lost loved ones in the attacks that occurred this past weekend in Saskatchewan. My thoughts and prayers are with those recovering from injuries, and grieving such horrific losses. I mourn with all Canadians at this tragic time. Signed, Elizabeth R."

The story of the monarchy and Canada's Indigenous people is a long and

complicated and broken story about empires and colonies and kings and queens and nations and first nations and treaties and promises kept and broken. But it's part of a story that Jesus tells. Not that the Queen is like the shepherd or the woman searching for a coin, or that anyone in particular is lost or found. But it's somehow a story where no one is forgotten. Deaths and brokenness and love and grief in a community in Saskatchewan are noticed, and someone pays attention because they matter. Death and brokenness and love and grief in a small gathering of family in a castle in Scotland are noticed, and someone pays attention because they matter.

That's the story Jesus tells: No one is forgotten, and no one forgets.

It's a story Jesus invites us into today.

Maybe some of us are lost sheep, wandering here and there, wondering where home really is or how to get there, and we are called to this table to eat with whoever else is here.

Maybe some of us are like lost coins, and we're pretty sure no one notices us wherever we are and we feel like we really have just been swept under the couch and will stay there until someone bothers to look. And someone does bother to look, and calls us to the table too.

Or we're a shepherd who's lost track and didn't even notice that someone was gone before it's too late, or we're a householder who has lost track of whatever really matters in life and whatever really gives value to life, and it's not money. And we too are called to the table.

We're hosted by this God who won't stop looking; all of us are hosted here.

You, me, Myles and Damien, Skye, a whole community, a royal family (that's all of us!), Elizabeth, all the saints...we are hosted because everyone counts. Nobody is just spare change, and we're found by Jesus, because in the divine household, in God's flock, everyone matters. AMEN.