

“The parables of the lost” almost sounds like a new television series, but of course, I am referring to three parables in Luke 15. The best known of the three lost parables is that of the lost son, the prodigal, we read last spring. Today’s parables, of the lost sheep and lost coin, while much shorter share the same flow as the story of the prodigal: loss, searching, recovery, restoration, rejoicing.

The three parables also share a common audience and context, both of which are key to understanding the parables. The audience and context are summarized in the first two verses:

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

Jesus’ audience for the lost parables is the grumbling Pharisees and scribes, who study and know the Jewish law. They are good – good people and good at their work. They can recite chapter and verse of what is right and what is sinful, who is righteous and who is impure, and so determine who is in and who is out of favor with God and themselves. They are convinced obedience to the law ensures order, and that law and order are what God desires.

The parables are offered as these keepers of the law keep noticing Jesus hanging out with those they have determined are out of favor – the unrighteous, unholy, corrupt, or simply suspect, all of whom are combined under the designation, sinners, or in today’s political vernacular, deplorables. Yet, not only does Jesus come near to the despised and sinful, he accords them the grace of hospitality by eating with them, offending the Pharisees’ order of purity.

There might be a crowd nearby, and it is likely Jesus’ own disciples are with him, but it is to those who are convinced they are “in,” and equally convinced they know who is “out,” to whom Jesus addresses the parables.

Two parables – a lost sheep and a lost coin. Luke 15:1-10.

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’

³ So Jesus 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? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And 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.” ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

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? ⁹When 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.” ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’*

I have been a fool. I am not self-confessing to mistakes I have made in ministry or life. That would require a sermon series. No, I am admitting I have been the fool of Psalm 14, verse 1. Without speaking the words out loud, I have said in my thoughts, “There is no God.” Now given such an admission by a minister leading a congregation does not instill either confidence or credibility, I will offer some examples of times I was the fool, thinking, “There is no God.”

I was such a fool when preparing a funeral service for the only infant I ever hope to bury, wondering how a God of love could allow any child to die. I was such a fool when I learned one of those who died in the Joplin, Missouri tornado was Tripp Miller, a fifty year old, downs-syndrome son of loyal members of the church I served, and dearly beloved in both church and community. I was such a fool when the father of a successful lawyer called me late on a Saturday night to tell me his son’s car had hydroplaned off a highway in Atlanta and he had been killed on his way to a fundraising event for a non-profit in which he had been active. I was such a fool when preparing for the memorial service for Ken and Jane Young of this congregation, senselessly killed just as they began her retirement.

In those four situations, as I sought to prepare words to share with parents, friends, and community, I pondered where God was in such tragedy. A part of me sought to answer the question I anticipated others were asking, “How can a good God allow such things to happen?” Oh, I can throw out the clichés with the best of them. “God will make something good happen out of tragedy or evil.” “The ways of God are a mystery we are not meant to understand.” And yes, there is an even more familiar one I never use, “All things happen according to God’s plan.”

I will add it is not only at times of death I ponder such questions of God’s presence or absence, but situations of personal crisis, disease, tragedy, or pain, as individuals and families live with fear, confusion, or anxiety – some seeking healing and wholeness, others hungering for food or belonging.

These same questions poured forth fifteen years ago, on September 11, 2001. I did not know anyone who died that day, nor do I recall any members of the Pittsburgh congregation I was serving lost a family member. Still again, the pondering of God’s presence or absence, even of God’s willingness to allow such a tragedy, were a part of my response, in prayer and preaching.

Now, I need to be honest and tell you, when I admit I am a fool for thinking, “There is no God,” as I ponder such deaths and tragedies, I am not really denying God’s existence. I am, again, more wondering about God’s presence and God’s absence, and even God’s relevance. That is also where I think Psalm 14 is pointing.

By connecting, “There is no God,” with the declaration there is no one who does good, the psalmist may be noting what one author calls, “practical atheism.” [Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 57] I find it an intriguing term. Rather than flat out denying the existence of God, practical atheism measures whether belief in God matters, whether God is going to be present or absent, active or passive at the times we need God, and in the ways we desire God to act. If God is not relevant and useful, then practical atheism says there is no need to believe in God. If God is going to keep at a distance, allowing bad things to happen to good people, then God does not really matter.

With practical atheism, God is beneficial only if bestowing blessings – usually on us – or if not blessing us, then exerting power, exacting vengeance, or satisfying our longing for justice on those who do evil, and at times quenching our thirst for revenge on those who seek to harm us. If God will perform in our way, according to our timetable, then that’s a God in which a practical atheist can believe – one who makes things happen for me, for us, for our people, for our nation.

The fool for the psalmist, the one who says, “There is no God.,” likely refers to both the outside invader who has terrorized the people of Israel and taken them into exile, as well as those members of the community who seek only their own good, and disregard the rights and dignity of others, particularly the most vulnerable. Both act out of a sense of “There is no God,” not again as if God does not exist, but believing God is far off and uninvolved, or even that God is unable or unwilling to respond to the cries of the poor and oppressed. So, if there are no evident consequences for doing evil, for oppressing the poor, for enslaving and owning people, for allowing hunger to exist, then one is tempted to live life as if there is no God.

After 9/11, church attendance spiked, for at least a week or two. Then it leveled back out. Perhaps people needed a temporary shelter, a place to gather with others across this nation who shared the horror, and perhaps without even knowing it, the embedded fear resides within many of us to this day. Yet, after a couple of weeks, the immediate symptoms passed, and life resumed, along with baseball, and football, because, as we say, “that’s who we are,” as if our strength is defined by a return to normal. Yet, perhaps as well, people did not stay, because most churches and preachers did not offer a convincing counter to a cry, “There is no God.”

That’s a struggle for me with 9/11, and it has lingered now for fifteen years. We had a horrible tragedy, we had a horrendous loss of life, and we had the sympathy of just about every country in the world. And in a sense, while I preached the Sunday after on Paul’s words in Romans 12 that quoted Deuteronomy, declaring, “Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. I will repay,” we pretty much knew God was not going to step in to wipe out Al Qaeda, or Osama Bin Laden. So, in a certain sense, we offered the words of the fool, “There is no God,” and took things into our own hands, perhaps even believing our hands were doing God’s work.

I do not pretend to know the ways of God, or the will of God, or the comprehensive plan of God, but from the parables of the lost, I believe Jesus is teaching us God’s way is about seeking out the sinner, the lost, even the terrorist. “But that does not make sense,” would be the common reply. It was likely the thoughts of the Pharisees and scribes that day in response to the parables.

As we discussed the parables at the men’s Bible study on Friday, while searching for a lost coin makes sense, it seems quite foolish to leave 99 sheep in the danger of the wilderness, just to seek out a single lost sheep. I wonder if in asking the question, “Which of you would not leave the ninety-nine?”, Jesus is expecting just about everyone to answer, “I wouldn’t. It does not make sense to endanger the many for the one.” I wonder if Jesus is toying with us, telling this parable in such a way to lure us into the very human, very practical response, “I wouldn’t,” just so he can teach of God’s impracticality, of a God who says, “I will and I do.”

Without discounting the grievous sin of any individual, or the brutality or evil of any group or nation that justifies the killing of innocents for their own ideology, we continue to have a seeking, searching God, who seems to be less concerned with the upright and righteous than in finding the one who is lost. What we uncomfortably realize is Jesus' lost parables are not for the lost, not for the sinner, the tax collector, the outcast, the impure, the terrorist. The parables are for any of us who see no hope for, extend no effort to, and offer no embrace around those we have condemned as unredeemable.

God will seem absent if we are seeking God only in visible ways of vengeance or healing, blessing the good and reviling the evil. Jesus teaches us we have a quirky kind of God who may seem absent because God is chasing after a single lost sheep, spending a lot of time finding a lost coin, and angering a loyal son when he celebrates a lost son who is found alive after squandering his inheritance. And why does God do so?

For God, the single one who is lost is still considered part of the whole flock, family, even if everyone else declares, "to heck with them." God seeks the lost to restore the whole. The nature of the shepherd, the woman, the father is to seek out the lost one because the sheep, the coin, the son belong to them. What Jesus wants the scribes and Pharisees to believe is those with whom he associates and eats belong to God as much as they do. He also wants them to join him in seeking the lost, the very ones they condemn as irredeemable.

Ours is a God who is looking for celebration, for a good party to rejoice at any lost soul who is found. Yet, the only way to find the lost one is to seek the lost one, to run out to greet the lost one, not simply wait for them to come to us.

What we discover is the parables are not so much about who is good, but who is God's.