

**The Lord Is My Seeking Shepherd and Sweeper:
I Shall Not Be Lost
Luke 15:1-10**

We see the majestic, mysterious God of the Universe through a glass darkly. We couldn't survive the full-faced radiation blast of God's glory. No one looks directly on God and lives.

But we seek and see indirectly wondrous glimpses of divine light, and we speak about God as best we can in our own limited language and experience. We know God is not us, but we sense deep in our souls that we've been created enough like God, in God's image, to relate to God, however imperfectly, as our divine Father, Mother, Helper, Healer, Friend.

Scholars call this *anthropomorphic* language: human, figurative language for God; our humble images for God.

In the biblical tradition, perhaps no image has proven more meaningful to more people than the Psalmist's classic confession: "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want." It's lodged deep in my heart, though I've been a city boy all my life. Most of my practical shepherding knowledge comes from the movie *Babe*, which skews things a bit since Babe's a pig who thinks he's a sheepdog.

Still, "the Lord is my shepherd" is woven tightly and thickly in the fabric of my faith.

And it was important for Jesus, too. Several times he punctuates his teaching with pastoral or shepherding imagery, as in his parable of the Lost Sheep, featuring the shepherd's search-and-rescue mission of a single sheep who'd wandered away from the flock.

In Luke 15, however, this parable is not a stand-alone story, but rather part of a trio of parables, all depicting from different angles God's seeking and saving a single, valuable lost object.

1. The first features God as Shepherd recovering a lost animal, one wayward sheep out of 100.
2. The second shifts to God as Housekeeper, sweeping the house to find one missing coin from a 10-piece set.
3. The third presents God as Father longing for and welcoming back the younger of 2 sons, who'd run away from home to a foreign, unforgiving land.

Of course, this last, lengthier story is the most familiar. We usually call it the parable of the Prodigal Son, but it could just as easily be labeled, the parable of the Gracious Father.

I'm glad our text today concentrates on the first two shorter, lesser-known "lost" parables, giving us a chance to explore more fully what they reveal about the majestic, mysterious God.

The first one obviously echoes Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” while setting that theme in a different key. Whereas the Psalm stresses our divine Shepherd’s *provision* (“I shall not want”) and *protection* (“Yeah though I walk through the valley of death”), Jesus’ shepherd story highlights the Lord’s *restoration or reclamation—seeking out and saving the lost one*.

As does the next parable, but with an interesting twist in gender and setting: a *woman* sweeping her floors, listening for the tinkle of a coin she lost and can’t afford to. “The Lord is my Sweeper-Woman.”

Putting the two together: “The Lord is my Seeking Shepherd and Sweeper: I Shall Not Be Lost.” Such a composite picture expands our vision of God alongside the familiar Shepherd image from Psalm 23 and the Father figure from the final “lost” parable.

Before zeroing in, however, on particular aspects of God as seeking Shepherd and Sweeper, I want to correct a common misconception of the “lost ones.” Most modern preaching on all three parables has been *evangelistic* and *individualistic*, calling each “lost” sinner-outsider to repent and be “saved.”

Nothing wrong with that approach, but it’s *not* the primary focus of these *restorative-communal* stories. The lost sheep, coin, and son represent things already belonging to the sheepfold, the coin-purse, and the household, who drift away from the “community” and are drawn *back* “home” by the loving shepherd, sweeper-woman, and father (though not the elder brother so much).

The only “lost” one that *decides* to repent and return is the prodigal son. Lost sheep just ba-a-a and bleat in their lostness until rescued; and lost coins just lie inert wherever they’re misplaced. Even in the prodigal son’s case, though he has a whole repentance speech prepared, his father, who’s been looking out wistfully for the boy’s return, never lets the kid give his speech. The father’s too busy loving, hugging, kissing, clothing, and throwing him a homecoming party to care about hearing his confession.

I suggest these parables showcase the deep-tissue bond between caretaker and cared-for, between seeker and lost ones. In the process, being lost, suffering loss, is experienced by *all* the characters, including the God-figures: not just those who lose their way and risk losing their lives, but also the overseers who *lose part of themselves* and long for reunion when they lose one of their own.

Let’s now venture into the wilderness with the Shepherd and get down on the floor with the Sweeper-woman and examine their search-and-recover stories more closely.

Luke’s Jesus addresses the “lost” parables to a group of religious teachers (Pharisees and scribes) who’d been criticizing him for dining with fraudulent tax collectors and other “sinners.” Jesus personalizes the first parable for these teachers: “Which *one of you* [gentlemen], having a hundred sheep?”

Putting *them* in the position of a shepherd cuts two ways: *socially* identifying them with a lower-class, nomadic occupation, far below their professional status; but *pastorally* associating them with superintending God's people in the train of the great shepherd-king David appointed by Pastor God: "The Lord is my shepherd."

In the first sense, Jesus puts the religious scholars on the "least" level with shepherds, tax collectors, and sinners; in the second sense, he recognizes their calling to the "greatest" level of caring service to all God's people, not least the "least."

And Jesus assumes the Pharisees and scribes are indeed capable of fulfilling their spiritual vocation. In a rhetorical tour de force, Jesus appeals to their better natures and enlists them as allies. The question, "Which one of you does *not* leave the ninety-nine and go after the one [sheep] that is lost?", expects an affirmative answer: "Of course, we would do that; none of us would abandon a poor, lost creature without trying to save it."

The case resembles rescuing an endangered child or ox even on the Sabbath, as Jesus stressed earlier in Luke.

Conversely, however, the biblical prophets issued scathing critiques of Israel's leaders who proved to be neglectful and abusive shepherds, preying on their own people and straying themselves from the flock they're supposed to tend. But while Jesus no doubt implies a warning against malevolent overseers, his primary message seems more positive, as if to say: "We all know how Israel's shepherds have failed in the past—even David had his horrible moments—but I trust that you present leaders do not fit that counterfeit bill. You're better than that!"

Moreover, Jesus places the burden of losing a single sheep *on the shepherd*: "Which one of you—*having lost* one sheep?" This doesn't automatically suggest the shepherd's culpable negligence. Sheep can't be shackled or permanently penned: they need freedom to graze and water. Even under the careful watch of a shepherd-team, as a hundred-member flock would require, one sheep can easily wander off, particularly in the "wilderness" where animals need to roam widely to find resources.

In the parable, the chief shepherd accepts responsibility for the lost sheep and kicks into rescue mode. Leaving the 99 with the under-shepherds, he seeks the missing one. This is a *good, faithful, God-like* shepherd whose goodness and faithfulness shine in his *recognition of loss* and *resolution to find*.

He springs into action and scours the wilderness "until he finds" that missing sheep. And when he discovers it, far from berating the dumb beast or beating it back to the fold, the shepherd takes matters into his own hands: lifting the sheep—all seventy to ninety pounds of it, likely frozen in fear—draping it across his shoulders, and clasping his hands around the animal's fore- and hind-legs for transport back home.

Jesus thus evokes not only a culturally accurate scene, but also a dramatically poignant one, where the shepherd himself becomes a *beast of burden* carrying the lost home.

There's a long tradition in art and literature associating each Gospel with different creatures: Matthew with a man; Mark a lion; John an eagle; and Luke an *ox*, that strong yoke-bearing, baggage-lading beast of burden. In a daring mix of images, we might say that this parable casts the God/Christ-figure as an *Ox-like Shepherd* carrying his vulnerable sheep on his back.

"The Lord is my shepherd" rings so familiarly and soothingly. "The Lord is my ox" takes some getting used to, but is well worth contemplating.

In the next parable shifts Jesus shifts the focus from a male shepherd retrieving a lost sheep to a female house-sweeper recovering a lost coin. But he still addresses the male teachers. So what point does Jesus aim to press on these guys with this woman's story?

Religious leaders never criticize Jesus for ministering to women or accepting them among his followers. Now at the end of Luke 7, one Pharisee named Simon does question Jesus' interaction with a unnamed "*sinner*"-woman, but that has less to do with her gender than her past behavior. Jesus' critics challenge his consorting with notorious sinners, male or female—but mostly male, like tax collectors.

In any case, the sweeper woman in Jesus' parable is no "sinner." She's as conventional as they come: cleaning her house, pinching pennies, and rejoicing with her women "friends and neighbors" when she finds her lost coin.

Luke often pairs male and female stories, demonstrating gender inclusiveness in the Jesus community. That's an important emphasis.

But again, the *main* point of these "lost" parables has to do with *God*. By sandwiching the sweeper-woman between the shepherd and the father, Luke's Jesus radically expands the Pharisees'—and our—understanding of God as Seeker and Savior of the lost. God as Shepherd and Father are familiar theological metaphors, easily absorbed by the religious authorities, who regard themselves as shepherds and patriarchs of God's people.

But what does God have to do with a poor sweeper-woman, scraping and scrounging to find one missing coin out of a measly ten-drachma collection, which amounts to about ten days of a day-laborer's minimum wage?

Jesus dares to claim that this woman embodies the seeking-saving work of *God* as surely as the shepherd and the father. God identifies with *her* as much as with male overseers. *She* has as much to teach male authorities about divine ministry as any shepherd or father—or king or warrior or any other macho images of God.

In particular, the sweeper-woman demonstrates God's first-responder actions in *seeking* the lost, whereas the emphasis with the shepherd and father falls more on their final *rescuing* and *restoring* the lost.

Jesus breaks down the woman's search operation into three parts: she (1) lights a lamp, (2) sweeps the house, and (3) searches "carefully"—diligently, intently—until she finds the coin. She may lack the muscle of the shepherd and money of the father, but she will not be outdone in her indomitable quest to track down and reclaim what's hers. More than the shepherd and father, *she* exemplifies the hand of God that will not rest until it lays hold of its own.

Another facet of God showcased by this vignette accentuates its modest domestic setting. Theologian Linda Maloney recalls a women's conference in Buenos Aires when this little parable, as she says, "first came into its own." Out of their experience of social and political struggle (*lucha*), these women discovered afresh "the ordinary and the everyday (*lo cotidiano*) as the place God is revealed; it takes place 'in the house'—long a symbol of believing community. It's a struggle to find what's been lost in the darkness. But it's also characterized by joy, celebration, and hope. Like the woman in the parable, God has her skirts tucked up and is busy sweeping and searching, too."

However little or much progress we've made in our journeys of faith, we all are still "prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love," as the hymn intones. But God never leaves or forsakes us.

However lost you may feel today for whatever reasons, receive this good news with joyous hope of recovery and restoration: "The Lord is my seeking shepherd and sweeper: I shall not be lost."

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