Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:10).

We always learn something important from Jesus’ parables when we know their intended audience. Luke tells us in today’s Gospel that the two parables of mercy about the shepherd who goes after a single lost sheep and the housewife who searches for a single lost coin were directed to two groups.

The first was made up of tax collectors and sinners, moral outcasts who were delighted to hear Jesus describe God as a merciful shepherd willing to retrieve a single errant sheep out of herd of 100, or God as a woman who sweeps out her house to find a single lost coin. The second audience were some eavesdropping scribes and Pharisees who were shocked by Jesus’ extravagant offer of divine grace to public sinners.

The scribes and Pharisees had Jesus under surveillance, and they did not have to listen or observe him for long to know that this hill country preacher was giving away the store and undercutting their role as caretakers of the faithful. They were the true shepherds of orthodoxy and faithful stewards assigned to dispense favors to Israel. Jesus’ popular ministry and so-called miracles were undermining their official authority.

The tax collectors and sinners, on the other hand, were being brought in from the cold, nourished like parched wilderness soaked with spring rain. They were like prodigal sons and daughters being welcomed home, fed, warmed and put to bed by a loving parent who had never lost track of them or stopped loving them.

Jesus' parables are extravagant. They defy logic and common sense. What shepherd would leave 99 sheep in the wilderness to search for one lost sheep? What sensible housewife would light a lamp and turn her house upside down to find a lost coin? But they describe God, Jesus said, whose mercy exceeds every human measure and is being offered unconditionally to everyone, even habitual sinners and social pariahs willing to turn homeward.

These parables are meant to probe our limits. Can we apply them to ourselves? The hardest sins to pry loose are the ones we cannot forgive ourselves for, the past mistakes and selfish acts we harbor within. We hold these beyond God's mercy because to expose them means surrendering our pride and opening up the shame of falling short of the perfection we had hoped to accomplish on our own. We wanted to be the good people who didn't need mercy. Instead, we became sinners like everyone else. But isn't it these lost, hidden parts of us that the divine shepherd and the holy housewife are after in order to make us whole again?

We will grasp the depth of God's mercy when we uncover our lost sheep and lost coins and hold them up to God's forgiveness and love. Then we will hear the angels singing and heaven rejoicing to welcome us home.

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