

*Based Gospel Reading: Luke 15:1-10
Pentecost 14; Proper 19*

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And 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.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. "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? When 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.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Luke 15:1-10

Some years ago, I used to own some property in the country and seriously considered raising sheep. This was before the Internet was widely available, so I bought a book called "Raising Sheep the Modern Way." For the most part, the book was a long chronicle of all the horrible ways that sheep die – apparently, they aren't especially hardy creatures. It convinced me that I really didn't want to raise sheep.

After I became a Christian, reflecting back on it, I also realized that Jesus didn't really give good advice about keeping sheep; and this reading is no exception. In reality, no shepherd would abandon 99 sheep in the wilderness to search for one stupid sheep that had wandered off. Similarly, I'm pretty sure none of us would have a party if we, like the women who lost a coin, lost a \$20 bill and then found it later after turning our home upside down. That's just not what most people would do; it's not how the world works.

Of course, I'm pretty sure that Jesus understands that His examples here didn't match with the experience of the people he was talking to. As usual, Jesus is talking about what people in the kingdom of God would do, not what people deeply rooted in the world would do. Jesus says, "what shepherd," or "what woman" wouldn't do "x," he's trying to contrast our real-world behavior with God-inspired behavior. Because as much as most of us might not behave like the shepherd or the woman in the parable, I hope we can all recognize that it is exactly what Jesus *would* do. It's what Jesus did on His journey to the cross.

Cultivating a spirit of generosity is an important part of the Christian life, which is what these parables are meant to show us by reminding us that God's love for us is unearned generosity, and that as God's people, we are invited to reflect that same generosity to others, that in doing so, we might make the world a bit more like the kingdom of God. Maybe most shepherds wouldn't go chasing after a single lost sheep, but God would – and did – and that has made all the difference.

