

## **God, the seeker** **Luke 15:1-10**

### **Table Manners**

“I saw them eating and I knew who they were.” This is a Middle Eastern proverb. Have you ever heard this? Maybe not. Does it make sense to you? For us, it does not really make much sense. Along with Korean food, I like hamburgers, pasta, pizza and fish and chips. I know it doesn’t sound healthy, but I like them. You would not say, “oh Pastor Yohan eats pasta and pizza so he must be Italian.” Eating fish and chips does not make me who I am. But in Jesus’ time, what you ate and whom you ate it with were critical matters because they were the marks of who you were. Especially, for the Jews, a proper Jewish meal was a worship service, and therefore, there were very specific rules about table manners such as what you ate and with whom you ate. Since sharing a meal was a worship service in which people remembered and honored God, cleanliness was most important: clean food, clean dishes, clean hands, clean hearts.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, those who sat with you had to be clean as well, otherwise, your sacred table would be spoiled.

Today’s scripture begins with a simple description of what was happening around Jesus. “By this time a lot of men and women of questionable reputation were hanging around Jesus, listening intently. The Pharisees and religious scholars were not pleased, not at all pleased. They growled, “He takes in sinners and eats meals with them, treating them like old friends.” From their words, we can assume that Jesus might have thrown parties for everyone. I mean everyone! Tax collectors and troublemakers were invited. Of course, the Pharisees and religious scholars were invited too. But it seemed that they refused to sit at the table with those who were deemed unclean. They stood there and crossed their arms over their chests and grumbled. When Jesus heard their grumbling, Jesus told them parables, the parable of lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin.

### **Absurd Celebration**

While the contents of these two parables are different, the basic structure is the same. A shepherd loses one of his sheep and a woman loses one of her ten drachmas. Both of them searched for what they had lost and found them. They were elated and threw a party to celebrate with their friends. Just ordinary stories... but do these parables really make sense? A party over a small coin?

Have you ever found unexpected money... in a book? A year after Juhee and I moved to Boston, I took a class about the church so thought I would like to reread one of my old books about the church. It was a hard covered book of over 600 pages. When I opened the book, I found a small envelope in the middle of the book... and in it... I found a few hundred dollars. Juhee had at some time put some emergency cash in one of my books and had completely forgotten about it. Of course, we were happy to get back this lost money and went out to dinner that evening, but we didn’t invite our friends to celebrate with us. Maybe we were not as elated as the woman who found her lost coin or the shepherd who found his lost sheep, but who would invite friends and throw a party over a single found coin? Maybe this shepherd and woman were odd for throwing a party over a coin and a small sheep. Maybe this story itself is absurd and maybe that’s the point Jesus would like to make.

This shepherd embarked on a search for the lost one. What did he do with the other 99 sheep? He left the ninety-nine in the wilderness, unprotected, and went after the one wanderer. Absurd! Isn’t it? What about this woman and her lost coin? She lit a lamp and swept the house... good idea. And when she found the coin, she rejoiced and threw a party for all her friends and neighbors, which was going to cost more than the coin was worth. That coin might have been a dowry or a special adornment

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.religion-online.org/article/table-manners/>

that somehow signaled her worth, so it might have had special significance, but still, her response to finding it seems excessive and absurd.

But that's the love of God we have received: the excessive and absurd love of God. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) That's excessive and absurd! Isn't it? But through this love, we have been found and accepted into God's family. This excessive and absurd love of God leads us to sit and eat with everyone!

### **99 sheep in the wilderness?**

These parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin are, first of all, about God. We are not the shepherd or the woman. God is the shepherd and the searching woman. We might be the lost sheep or one of the 99. Or maybe both of them at the same time. As you know, our beloved UMC has been divided into the UMC and the Global Methodist Church in terms of positions on human sexuality. I know this is a difficult issue and there is no middle ground. But what really tore at my heart was that we failed to see each other as brothers and sisters, regardless of our positions and refused to sit together at the same table. We have decided to stay only with like-minded people. We may be the ninety-nine sheep but we are also the lost in many aspects. Like the Pharisees and religious scholars, we refuse to sit with those who are different from us. Yes. We are lost in many aspects and we need to be found by our shepherd again. We need to be led to the larger flock. The good news is that our Christ, the good shepherd, yearns and searches for the lost including us. Whoever you are, stop running away! Stop hiding from God who searches for you, who brings you to stand with others and thus makes you whole!

Some scholars say that the coin the woman lost may have been the woman's dowry, which is worn as an ornament. If one coin is missing, her ornament becomes incomplete. In a similar sense, one hundred often represents wholeness in the Bible. The ninety-nine sheep cannot be perfect without the lost one. Imagine that you are putting together a 1000 pieces-jigsaw puzzle and you have almost finished it, when you realize one piece is missing. How would you feel? Not very excited! You would search under the table and sweep the floor. When you found the piece and put that last piece of the puzzle in place, you would be happy to make the image of the puzzle complete.

Each one of us is like a unique piece of the puzzle. My life is unique and so are David, Carl, and Diane's... all of our lives are distinctive. However, our lives together make a beautiful picture and God knows the whole picture. God, the creator, creates each of us unique and beautiful. God, the seeker, keeps searching for the lost and putting them together with others so that everyone can be perfect. It means that you matter. Your lives matter for God and for us. All lives matter because, without them all, our lives would never be perfect.

While God, the seeker, searches for the lost, we have our work to do. Our job is to rejoice with God. This means we give up the idea that we can love God and despise others who look different, think differently and act differently. We don't condemn or judge or exclude others until they measure up to our own personal standards, we simply rejoice and embrace who they are as an important piece of the puzzle. Some pieces of the puzzle may look very different and even weird, but that's what makes a puzzle a puzzle. That's what makes a puzzle interesting. God is searching and will complete the puzzle when God's kin-dom comes. Until then, let us embrace one another in love and rejoice in God.