

“That Which Was Lost, Is Found!”

LaPorte New Church Swedenborgian
Rev. Kit B. Billings, M.Div., MA
March 27, 2022

Scripture

Isaiah 26:3-4

Luke 15:1-10

Hymns or Songs

"Wonderful Words of Life" 623

"Amazing Grace"

"Lord of All Hopefulness"

Isaiah 26:3-4

³You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you.

⁴Trust in the LORD forever,
for the LORD, the LORD Himself, is the Rock eternal.

Luke 15:1-10

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

The Parable of the Lost Coin

⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Insights for Worship

Defn. of “Charity” (*Swedenborg Explorer’s Guidebook* P. 349 by Rev. Dr. William R. Woofenden)

“A spirit of caring, of disinterested service, a heartfelt delight in doing good to one’s neighbor without any thought of recompense.”

Doctrine of Faith 36 by Emanuel Swedenborg

“Central to the [true] Christian faith as it applies to us is that we believe in the Lord, since believing in Him is the union with Him that gives us salvation. Believing in Him is trusting that He saves people; and since we can have this trust only if we live good lives, believing in Him also means leading a good life.”

SERMON: “That Which Was Lost, Is Found!”

Years ago while I was attending a wedding reception I heard a man share with me some words that struck a chord deep within me, words that I have not forgotten since then. He said: “I feel like there are parts of myself that have been lost along the way, and I don’t know if I can somehow find them again.” He got all choked up inside and then said, “Reverend, it’s hard for me to put it into words, but it feels like my youthful joy and happiness about life has burned down like a candle wick, when no more wax can be burned...and I don’t know how to get it back?” And so, I just sat with him that day, and listened to his life story.

How about for yourself? Are there qualities or aspects of yourself, things you can or cannot name, which have been lost along the way? And if that is your case as well, what do you suppose is God’s attitude about those lost parts of yourself? Might it be that the Lord’s response for you is very much like the message in these two parables today—that that which was lost, shall be found?

Maybe the lost part or parts of yourself have been greatly affected by emotional wounds suffered long ago or even very recently? Perhaps others are due to scarred memories? Or, perhaps there is some really huge spiritual or psychological truth that as of yet has not been found?

And so, the inevitable question looms: **can we find the lost parts of ourselves? Can we become...whole again?** I wonder if these kinds of questions were in the minds of the brave shepherd and the woman in our gospel reading this morning, who lost their beloved sheep and coin respectively? I wonder if they felt like they had lost a part of their lives and might not ever find it again? Clearly by their passionate behavior to recover that beloved sheep and that priceless coin tells us that those two losses were

immense, to say the least, and they were willing to continue the search until that which was lost was found.

Regarding this first parable of the 100th sheep that was lost, think about your own experiences of owning and bonding with your own pets in your lifetime: would you agree with me that they become an actual extension of yourself—a living, breathing part of you? Your own dog, your own cat, or your own bunny rabbit—they aren't just any dog, or any cat or any animal. They are yours! The shepherd in today's story would say that his sheep wasn't just any sheep, but it was his sheep, a particular one. Or rather, ***a one-of-a-kind sheep.***

And what about this unforgettable woman who had lost her silver coin? Did you know that from an historical-cultural perspective it is very likely that her passion for finding it was due to one of two possibilities: 1) It may have been an issue of genuine necessity. One silver drachma or coin back then was not worth very much, but it was equal to an entire day's earnings by a man back then—and the Jews of those days were typically peasant citizens of the Roman Empire, who were usually living on the edge of starvation on a daily basis. This means that that one silver coin could have made the difference between malnourishment and severe hunger or going to bed that night with food in their bellies. Or 2) there may have been a much more romantic reason for finding that particular coin. The mark of a married Jewish woman back then was a special headdress she wore during her marriage ceremony, one made of ten silver coins linked together by a silver chain. It was not unusual for a Jewish girl back then to scrimp and save for years in order to collect her ten precious coin headdress, which was almost as significant as her wedding ring. And after her completed ten-coin headdress was finished, it became so inextricably hers, that nothing could force her to part with it, not even severe financial debt. The lost coin in this parable may easily have been one of the priceless ten headdress coins that once lost would be searched for as diligently as if it were her wedding ring.

But, in either case, can you imagine the joy that this woman felt who found her tenth coin?! And think of the shepherd too, of the jubilation and gladness he felt upon finding his lost sheep! He would have been humming or whistling and carrying it home around his shoulders feeling immensely happy as the story tells us. And both the shepherd and the woman were so glad to have found what was lost, that they then called their friends and neighbors together to share in their jubilation.

Jesus was trying to teach a very new kind of spiritual truth to his listeners that day, to the scribes and Pharisees and to the tax collectors and other so-called sinners. What He taught them was a polar opposite to what the orthodox believed. The Pharisees, you see, had a very different view of how God feels about and deals with sinners. They believed that it was only those who kept very strict, detailed rituals and rules (called "the law") about how to live a righteous life were esteemed in God's eyes.

And they knew that the tax collectors and shepherds were either unwilling or unable to keep on track with their fastidious traditions. And so therefore, anyone unwilling or unable to keep up with their micromanaging, judgmental ways were categorically dubbed a “sinner.”

The orthodox Jews back then called the “sinners” the People of the Land; and there was a complete barrier between the Pharisees and the People of the Land. The Pharisaic regulations laid it down saying: a Pharisee was forbidden to be the guest of any such man or to have him as his guest. He was even forbidden, so far as it was possible, to have any business dealings with those outcasts. It was the deliberate Pharisaic aim to avoid every contact with the people who did not observe the petty details of the law. Obviously, they would be shocked to the core at the way in which Jesus spent a lot of time with people who were not only rank outsiders, but sinners, contact with whom would necessarily defile them.

We will understand these parables more fully if we remember that the strict Jews back then said, not: "There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents," but instead they taught, "There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God."

So now, let us look again at the way that Jesus taught the people about God’s attitude toward the lost and the sinners. Traditionally in these two parables, God is in the role of the shepherd and in the role of the woman seeking to find her lost coin. In opposition to the beliefs and teachings of the Pharisees, the Lord gave the people the view that God cherishes those who have gone astray or become lost. Furthermore, Jesus taught that God’s love for sinners inspired God to go out and search for them in the greatest of ways, and who kept on searching until He finds them. And then upon finding them rejoices magnificently in a neighborhood celebration.

But there is yet another meaning to these two parables taught by our Lord, which is what we find within our theology called the *inner meaning* of these parables. Concerning the shepherd’s story, Jesus said, “**Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them.**” Christ is asking us to imagine we are this shepherd. At the beginning of this story we find that prior to us losing one of our precious sheep, we had been whole and complete—a shepherd with 100 sheep—or, to include the next parable, a woman with ten coins. But then life happens, and we lose one of our beloved sheep or we lose one of our precious silver coins. The inner-spiritual meaning of these parables is asking you and me personally, **have you somehow lost a very important part of yourself? And if so, what is it like to lose it?**

If you do have experience of what it feels like to lose a part of your wholeness, then you know what it is like to be the shepherd or the woman in these stories this morning. Out of my experiences of life, I would hazard to guess that we all wind up

losing some vital part of our wholeness—for one or more legitimate reasons (death of loved one, divorce, gradual loss of one's health, or so many disappointments in life). So, would you say that as a listener this morning, are you more like the "sinners" and tax collectors in this scenario (those who were aware that they were lost), or are you more like a scribe or Pharisee listening to Christ's words (being blind to having lost some part of your wholeness and choosing instead to point the finger at others in judgmental fashion)?

And so, what part or parts of your life are you searching for today? What do you need to have to have more wholeness? Maybe you are conscious that something vital is missing....or, maybe you're not really aware of that which is lost, but instead you have a foggy knowing, a restless longing to regain that which you once had in life?

I did research this week online looking at some blogs of people who were struggling to find their whole self again. One lady in her 30s had this to share:

She wrote: "For the longest time, I did not want to feel anything. I hated the negative feelings and emotions I had because of disappointments from family and from family expectations. I had hurts from being socially awkward, lacking of self-esteem, getting all the bad breaks, heartbreaks, staying focused on the hurtful emotions even more than the positive ones. I did not rebel against all of this by self-inflicted behaviors such as substance abuse or self-harming. Instead, I learned how to suppress my feelings and emotions, using my rational brain only and not the heart. I can probably say that I was uncompassionate and unsympathetic. I questioned my Higher Power here and there, and started thinking logical at certain times, again, where my brain was working, yet not in sync with my heart. I lost friends, loved ones, and tried to assess my feelings and emotions, and I found slight feelings of sadness, no tears—not going through proper grief, and the majority of my feelings and my heart remained suppressed."

She continued: "About 8-10 years ago, I started attending church on a weekly basis, fulfilling my obligations to the church and with family, tried to listen to the gospel and reflect on it at least a word or phrase for a day, and it started to feel like I am here for a purpose. Now, I still try to be of existence with purpose in whatever good aspect of this life can use me as an instrument. I was asked by a friend, again, going back to my old self, being logical, using the brain with a dead heart, 'How can I believe that there is a God, a Higher Power, if He is so powerful, and yet could not come down here on Earth and stand in front of me and show Himself?'"

"I felt it, in my heart," she writes, "that He touched me, in ways unrecognizable to me in the past. That God and I had moments, alone, even when I try to push away people, which has healed me to restore me to my own self, a child of God, so innocent and pure, and that somehow through it all, I am saved. And now, having great support of trusted friends, has helped me a lot in understanding how all of our feelings and

emotions are valid, whether good or bad. All of them are healthy emotions—healthy that is, when expressed appropriately.”

In conclusion, can you perhaps, give a name to that part of you, which was lost and is being found again? I pray that each of us can learn to look at ourselves and at others with compassion, and know that the Lord and His angels are working now, every day, to help us to find that which was lost, and is being found again...today! Amen.