

“LOST AND FOUND”
Psalm 32
March 14, 2010
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Do you all know what a triptych is? It is traditionally a work of art that is created in three hinged panels. The two side panels are usually lesser than the central panel, meant to augment or contextualize it. You see a lot of triptychs in Byzantine and then Greek Orthodox Christian art. They are meant to be objects of meditation, images which focus our hearts and minds on the things of God.

I’ve always thought of our gospel reading for today, the fifteenth chapter of the gospel of Luke, I’ve always thought of it as a kind of literary triptych. It consists of three parables of things lost and found. The first two—the shorter parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin—they are the side panels, and the third parable—the parable of the lost sons—is the main event, the center section if you will.

These three parables are definitely intended by Luke to be seen as hinged, meant to be read together, meant to augment and deepen the meaning of each other—a single piece in three parts. So I’m going to take some time here to take you through the panels one by one, and see where we end up.

First the setting. We are told that sinners and tax collectors were coming to listen to Jesus, and the scribes and Pharisees were disgusted, saying “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So Jesus told them—the scribes and Pharisees—three parables that he thought would be particularly helpful to them: our verbal triptych.

The first panel, the first parable, is the parable of the lost sheep. It’s pretty straightforward until we get to the end. The shepherd is out in the fields with his 100 sheep. One of them is lost; he goes to find it. And when he and the sheep come safely back, there is great rejoicing. In fact we are told “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who need no repentance.” You’re supposed to be laughing here. This is a joke. Do you get it? Ok, there are about 150 of you here. Will the 1½ people here who have sinned please raise your hands. Ok, how about those of you who need no repentance: will you raise your hands now. That’s the joke. Because we all know that in the world of human beings, there are none of us who are above sin. The Pharisees knew that too. Still they separated the world into the clean and the unclean, sinners and well. . . those whose sins are unimportant, so they’re not really sinners, not like those other folks over there—like tax collectors and fallen women.

Which takes us to panel two: the parable of the lost coin. It’s one of my favorites. I almost got myself thrown out of the church in my early years when I suggested that The Church of the Good

Housekeeper would be as good a name for a congregation as Church of the Good Shepherd! In this parable, a woman has ten silver coins, and one of them is lost. So she lights her lamp and searches her house until she finds it. Then she puts the coin back in the pile with the other coins. Once she does that, you don't know which one is the coin that was lost, because they're all essentially the same. All silver coins: of equal value, no distinction.

Just as we are God's sheep, we are God's coins. And the thing about being coins is that you can't distinguish between good coins and bad coins, sinner coins and non-important sinner coins, clean coins and unclean coins. It's nonsense to talk in such a way about coins. Just like it's nonsense to God to distinguish between real sinners and well, those of us whose sins are of greatly less weight, less importance, trivial really in the general run of things.

And just in case we haven't gotten the point yet, there is parable three: the central panel of our triptych, the parable of the lost sons, so familiar to us all. A man had two sons, and one of them was a wastrel and the other stayed home on the farm and was helpful and generally a good guy. The younger son finally repents of his evil ways, comes home, begs forgiveness, and his father throws a party for him. And when the older son hears about all this, his heart is filled with envy, greed, lack of compassion towards his brother. His father comes to speak with him, saying "You know that all that I have is yours. You're not losing anything here. So why can't you be happy about your brother? Why must you be so self-righteous? You are both my beloved sons, my cherished sheep, my coins of great value."

What is the most important difference between the two brothers? It's not that one is good and one is bad. It's not that one has worked hard and the other not so much. It is that the wastrel brother *knows* he needs to repent, and the older brother still does not. The younger brother sees the world as God does: the joy of sin forgiven and life begun anew. The older brother: he's not honest enough with himself to understand and acknowledge that pride, self-righteousness, and stinginess of pocket and heart are sins which can separate us from God every bit as much as drunkenness, gambling, and waste.

So that's ultimately why this triptych is created for us. Yes, it's about sin and repentance, and those who acknowledge their sinfulness and those who don't, but it backs up a step from there, and finally focuses us on an honesty of heart and mind that lies at the center of Christian life. We are called by God to the public honesty that keeps us from lying, cheating, and stealing from others, and also to an inward honesty that disciplines us to look at ourselves as we really are. And when we're talking about inward honesty, we're not talking here about obsessive self-denigrating thoughts and action that are as sinful as self-righteousness (sinful here being defined as that which separates us from God). True honesty in and out: the wisdom and insight to see ourselves for the people we are, to repent of that which we have to repent, to celebrate that which we have to celebrate, and to act straightforwardly in our dealings with the world.

It seems pretty elementary, doesn't it? A friend asked me what I was preaching about this morning and I said honesty, and she looked at me as if, well, duh. . . And yet honesty has become almost a countercultural notion in these days. Our standards have fallen pretty low for others and for ourselves. For example, we have come to expect public debate to be carried on in distortions, omissions, and outright lies. Isn't that true? It's just the way things are. We're not even much outraged about it any more. On a different level, I was talking with an OSU professor about the problem of plagiarism at the university. When I went to college, you got caught cheating once and you were out—expelled. Now internet term papers and solutions to textbook problem sets are everywhere. Many students buy them without even much thought, I'm told, a "creative" way to do well in their education. And it's not just students. I look at my own profession. When I went to a preaching conference two years ago, all of the presenters talked about the problems of both plagiarism and dishonesty in ministers. There are lots of sermons floating out there in the internet ether that ministers regularly steal, and, as well, there are many sites where ministers can buy sermons: \$277 and up for a year's worth of weekly sermons from sites like preachit.com, [sermonsearch](http://sermonsearch.com), or my favorite website title: desperatepreachers.com. It's a big business and lots of ministers out there are passing other people's work off as their own. Worse, they lie to themselves about it, justifying their actions on grounds of efficiency. It leaves them more time for pastoral work. One minister told me there's no real difference between choosing a sermon and writing a sermon. I'm not sure his congregation would agree.

We all have a tendency to lie to ourselves when we want something that is wrong or that we probably shouldn't have. We try to find a way in our minds to make it right. As my friend Debbie says, you can always find a reason why it's time for chocolate. We are made with facile minds, and one of the things we do best with those minds is to try and deceive ourselves. We tell ourselves that the things we do wrong are not as bad as the things other people do. Like the Pharisees, we tell ourselves: they're the real sinners, and we, well, our wrongs are just not that bad. Not enough that God will notice. Not enough that we should change. That's why Luke tells us Jesus's triptych of parables—with sheep and coins, and older brothers and younger brothers. Because none of us are left out of that picture. All of us are called to meditate on it, and then try to do a better job of both looking at ourselves straight on, and creating and rewarding honesty in public life. Just tell the truth to others and to ourselves. It may be a simple concept to understand, but we all can do a better job of carrying it out. Thanks be to God. Amen.