

September 11, 2022
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19, Year C
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28
Psalm 14
1 Timothy 1:12-17
Luke 15:1-10

The Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin are both familiar and foreign. We *know* them so well. But I wonder whether we really *feel* them.

Jesus's first listeners would have *felt* them. But I didn't when I first looked at the readings assigned for this Sunday. And so I began to ponder how I would tell an equivalent parable. That's how I arrived at what I'll call the Parable of the Lost Sock. It goes like this: "What woman, having folded an entire basket of laundry and come up missing exactly one sock, does not turn the house upside down until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls to her spouse, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the sock that was lost!'"

For this "parable" to make any sense whatsoever, you have to fill in some blanks, and with information that is particular to me rather than universal to humankind. For example, if you know the houses in my neighborhood, you might correctly assume that our washer and dryer are in the basement, that we collect and fold our laundry in our bedroom two floors up, and that that distance provides ample enough opportunity for sock truancy. You might go on to infer that I do in fact somehow manage to lose exactly one sock a ridiculously large proportion of the times I do laundry. Finally, you might guess that I'm not very chill about these losses, and you'd be correct. I have plenty of other socks, and still a missing sock exasperates me, and that exasperation spurs me to its urgent retrieval.

My parable isn't really equivalent to the originals. My sense of urgency to find a sock stems from my need for order rather than from the value of the sock, which is a tiny fraction of the wealth that I possess. In stark contrast, most of the hearers of the first gospel stories owned hardly anything and lived from day to day. A single lost sheep or a single lost coin would have been a very big deal. We can do the math in these parables: lost is one percent of the sheep or ten percent of the coins. Still, I don't think we yet quite get it. These parables would have stirred the first hearers much more viscerally than they stir us.

Let's try to imagine both a sense of urgency, and a realization that the urgency is rooted in the high value of the lost item. And now let's remember that Jesus isn't talking about lost *things*. Rather, those lost *things* are metaphors for lost *people*. Remember the prompt that opened parables: "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.'"

If the point is lost people, I wonder which of the people in this story are still and truly lost. Maybe it's the tax collectors and sinners. But Jesus seems already to have found them. So maybe actually it's the Pharisees and scribes who still need to be found. And maybe Jesus is implying that he's coming for them next.

Of course the first people that Jesus found were those original disciples. But here's the thing: he found them, but they didn't somehow miraculously transform into some embodiment of perfection, at least not as far the gospels go. Right up until the end, the disciples continue on their bumbling ways. Like a chronically missing sheep, Jesus had to keep bringing them back.

I said at the beginning that we all know these parables, but I wonder whether we *feel* them. As Christians, the sheep and coin are metaphors for us, and we have presumably been found. But maybe it doesn't always feel that way. Maybe for you it has never quite felt that way. I can say that my own spiritual life has always felt more like that of a continually wandering sheep than a sheep that has ever been enclosed in a sheepfold.

This got me pondering an idea: what if "lost" versus "found" is yet another false forced binary? In a false forced binary, very few people exist at the poles. Therefore, in this case, very few people are truly "lost" or "found." Instead of a binary, we would think instead of a spectrum with "lostness" on one side and "foundness" on the other. Neither side of the center is intrinsically good or bad; each person occupies a place between the extremes. As with some personality traits, one's location isn't fixed, but rather shifts back and forth over time.

At every location, whether or not *we* are seeking *God*, *God* is seeking *us*. To me it's feels like a relief to leave the seeking up to God. I'm not even sure that seeking is quite the correct word; instead we might just say that, at every location, God is fully and energetically *present*. Earlier I mentioned being spurred to sock urgency by a need for order. Some of us have internalized a God who works very like that. But these parables tell us that God has a very different motivation. God's urgency to be present with us is rooted in our immeasurable value.

I'm going to shift gears. Today we're kicking off our program year and our celebration of the 175th anniversary of St. Thomas's Church. This church's first worship service was on Easter Sunday, 1948. That year Easter Sunday fell on April 23, but this year it falls on April 9.

St. Thomas's was founded by a handful of people who up and decided to start a church. They drafted bylaws and found a priest and a lecture hall to rent for services. A few years ago, one of my sermons included a particular story about the founding of St. Thomas's. I want to offer it again today. It's from a sermon preached by the church's first rector, the Rev. Dr. Eben Edwards Beardsley, on Easter Sunday 1873, the 25th anniversary of St. Thomas's Church. By the way, that's his portrait in the Lounge. In that anniversary sermon, he talked about the church's founding and offered this amusing tidbit:

The faith of those who originated [the parish] was larger than their personal influence or their pecuniary ability, and because the enterprize (sic) was thus commenced, some honestly feared that it would prove a failure. Before much had been done, and while the new organization was attracting the attention of Episcopalians in the city, a zealous Christian woman, now gone to her rest, was one day asked by a friend "why it was named St. Thomas's Church?" And the rather sarcastic reply was given, that "she did not know unless it was to indicate the doubtfulness of the project."¹

These days, most Episcopal churches are anchored by older people who have been members of that church for decades. There are usually a few whose families have been members of the church for generations. That's not the case with this church. We have a few folks who are nearing the twenty-year mark, but most have been here for a much shorter time. The person with the longest history here at St. Thomas's is Julie Kelly, our church's Parish and Property Administrator. She has been on staff in one capacity or another for over thirty years. She was recently reading Vestry meeting minutes from the 1950s, and the Vestry was even then people were bemoaning the church's high turnover in membership.

I started thinking about this anniversary over two years ago—I can't remember exactly when, but it was some time before the pandemic. I wondered even then about how to mark the anniversary of a church with parishioners who aren't bound by its history. I came to wonder about marking the anniversary of a church during an era of church membership decline, a decline that has been hastened by the pandemic. To be honest, I'm still wondering. But we'll figure it out. That's what the people of St. Thomas's have always done.

You'll hear more about the history of the church over the course of the coming months. We'll also spend some time pondering who we are now and what we hope for the future. You might start by asking yourself questions like these: Why are you here? What do you value? What do you hope for? Meanwhile, to help kick off our anniversary celebration, this sermon will be followed by the renewal of baptismal vows and the Litany for the Mission of the Church.

The character of St. Thomas's has changed over time, but one thing that I suspect never changed is this church's kinship with its patron. We're not doubters, exactly, but then Thomas got a bad rap with that label. I like to think of us instead as curious wanderers, hovering in the zone between the poles of lostness and foundness, open to the winds of the Spirit, not just sought but always accompanied by our urgently loving God.

Notes

¹ E.E. Beardsley, "A Sermon Preached in St. Thomas's Church, New Haven, Easter, 1873, The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Parish," (New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse and Taylor, Printers, 1873), available online from Project Canterbury at <http://anglicanhistory.org/usa/eebeardsley/thomas1873.html> (accessed November 17, 2019).