

Chuck Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
First Christian Church  
Colorado Springs, Colorado  
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## Stop, Luke and Listen: A Summer Sermon Series 8. "Pack It In. Pack It Out"

*Luke 15:3-10 (NRSV) So he told them this parable: 4 "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? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 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.' 7 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. 8 "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? 9 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.'*

The first summer after Barbara and I were married, we were both pastors at two little churches in the west Texas desert. And it was time for a vacation, but we didn't have a lot of money. But a church friend lent us their 75 year old, very rustic, family cabin in the national forest near Taos, New Mexico. We had a wonderful four days, high in the mountains beside a rushing stream, snug in our stone cabin, escaping the August inferno temperatures of west Texas. But, unfortunately, vacations must come to an end. And when we left the mountains we had an extra passenger in our car going out that we did not have coming in -- a large plastic sack of the garbage that we had generated that week. And the sack was very full. Now, I intended to get rid of it at the community dump not too far from the cabin, but somehow I missed it. And so we drove on into the city of Taos to do a little final sightseeing and a little shopping.

After our shopping was done, we returned to the hot car, and were greeted by

the unmistakable aroma of sun-baked trash. Now while I am a firm believer in the wonders of plastic, I just didn't want to risk driving 500 miles home with a load of simmering trash. But as I looked on the map at our route home, I figured that it would be no problem to find a place to be rid of it -- for the route we were taking passed by more than a dozen national forest campgrounds. And where there are campgrounds, there are trash cans and dumpsters. Right? So off we went. And every time I saw a campground coming up, I slowed the and looked for the dumpster. But, instead of a dumpster, at every single campground was the sign "*Pack It In. Pack It Out.*" For these were all primitive campgrounds in which everything you brought in you had to take back out -- including your trash. And so, laden with our load of increasingly aromatic debris, we continued even more intensely to look for a place to lose it!

But it was not to be -- for that sign, "Pack It In. Pack It Out," greeted us at every single campground. Finally, more than a hundred and fifty miles onwards, in a little tiny town, I saw a city park with a dumpster. I jerked the car in beside it, got out, opened the tailgate, heaved the bag into the dumpster, got back in the car -- and stopped. For I was not 100% sure that I'd dumped the black plastic sack containing the garbage, and not the black plastic sack containing our dirty clothes. So, after a final check of the contents of the remaining plastic sack, we were off, finally lightened of our unwanted load.

Our problem that day was that we were urgently trying to lose something, to be rid of something, to throw it away and never see it again. But in the two parables that we have heard this morning from Luke's gospel, it's the other way around: here people

are urgently trying to find something, to get something back. Whether it is a lost sheep or a lost coin, what we see in our scripture for today is an urgent, almost frantic attempt, not to get rid of something, not to lose something, but to find something. To recover something that is valuable, whose loss is incredibly important.

And yet, you know what? Both of these little parables in Luke's gospel, the one about the lost sheep and the one about the lost coin, seem a little odd on the face of it. In fact, forget just for the moment that this is scripture, and just think about how strange these two stories really are. Try to hear them as if you're hearing them for the first time. I mean, suppose you are a shepherd, in charge of 100 sheep, in the unfenced Palestinian hills. (Now this is not the relatively flat pastures of eastern Colorado or western Kansas, all nicely marked off into sections and efficiently fenced. No, this is the Palestinian desert full of scrub cedar and wonderful places for livestock to wander away -- permanently.) And come day's end, you find yourself one sheep short. Now would you really leave 99 of those sheep unattended there in the wilderness while you went rooting around in the deepening darkness for the one that was lost? Common sense would seem to tell us to wait until morning, wouldn't it? Otherwise, you might find yourself the proud owner of 1 found sheep and 99 lost ones. Or consider the woman and her lost coin. On the face of it, this too seems like a poor strategy – to spend the night looking for that one lost coin, by the dim and smoky light of an oil lamp, probably using as much oil as the coin is worth. And, anyway, you and I both know that in any household things manage to disappear with annoying regularity: socks get divorced while they travel through the laundry, car keys do not seem to stay where they are put, the sofa seems to gobble coins from pockets. And yet I have learned and I'm sure

most of you have also learned that most of these temporarily lost things do in fact turn up when we're less tired or more attentive or indeed by the light of day. So, given all this, given common sense, why do these parables portray this kind of all-out effort? Why go to such great lengths to seek and to find? Why risk the 99 sheep for the one? Why risk a long evening in the dark looking for a coin that will probably turn up by the light of day?

Well, a little digging will tell us why. Let's look more closely at the parable of the lost coin. To really understand this story, try to imagine that you live before a time of photographs. Imagine you are the woman in this story -- probably a widow. She has no pictures of her husband, she has no portrait of him on the mantle. She has no photo on the nightstand to remind her of him. But what she **does** have is her string of 10 coins. And these are not just any coins; no, we know from the customs of that day that they are probably the coins that her husband gave to her at their wedding, attached to a kind of chain or bracelet. And so far from being simply a lost piece of small change, these coins are probably just about the only material reminder she has of that marriage, of the love that bound them together, of the life they shared. Do you begin to see why losing even one of those coins even for a little while is just intolerable? Do you begin to see why that lighting the lamp and sweeping that dirt floor of the house until the coin is found becomes not just understandable but *imperative*? For the coin is not just a coin -- it is the tangible symbol of a relationship which was at the center of her life and which helped create who she is.

And **that** is why, as the scripture tells us, there is such a loud rejoicing when that coin is found. For something that is crucial to life is regained. Something which sustains and comforts is again available. And so, indeed, call the friends, call the neighbors, and rejoice. For life has been put aright once again -- and that is *always* cause for celebrating. This morning, then, what I think that this parable invites us to ask is this: What have you and I lost that needs to be found? What have you misplaced in your life that has left you a little empty, a little ragged around the edges? What is missing from your life that used to be there but now is not?

Well, for some folks what has been slowly lost is the simple delight in knowing things, the sheer joy of learning, the wonderful power of ideas to captivate and inspire us. Have you ever watched a one- or two-year old at play and realized that to them the world is a wonderfully intriguing place to be, full of marvelous mysteries, chock-full of things to know, things to find out? Or listen to a three-year old's sometimes endless series of "whys" and you know (even when you're awfully tired of hearing the question) that here is a love of learning that is wonderful. But the world sometimes slowly grinds that gift out of you and me. Too many parts of life can become too much drudgery and rote. Instead of welcoming new ideas, they can instead come to appear to us simply as impositions and threats.

What else have you or I perhaps lost ? Well, for some folks it may be a loss of energy, a loss of a zest for living. Again, our children have what we sometimes wish we could bottle and take a swig of now and then. And at least some of the time, they know how to spend that energy on some really important things: when you watch them

play, and listen to them talk, you know that fairness and justice are of utmost importance to a child. The cry "But that's not fair" rings throughout childhood and it bespeaks a concern that things ought to be just and right. But sometimes that zest for life and that passing for God's justice can get numbed in you and me. And then the question "is it fair" gets replaced too easily by the question "will it work?" And we lose our zest, our energy; we end up "settling" too often for something far short of God's vision.

For others, maybe what has been misplaced is simply hope. When our daughter Katie was six years old she solemnly informed me of something. She said *"Daddy, I hope we get to have more church services, then there wouldn't be so many poor people -- because the more we get to go to church the more money we get to give."* It's actually a pretty profound stewardship theology, but what intrigues me on this occasion is how her observation is so full of **hope** about how she can make a difference to the world. She had no doubt, even at six years old, that by her life and actions, things could be made better. And, indeed, we cannot live without hope -- hope is not silly or extravagant. It is not a *luxury* that's possible only when things are going well. No, hope is at the very center of Christ's gospel. It is something that God offers us when times are good and bad, when change comes our way, when we feel our energies flagging for our mission.

And so this morning, Jesus Christ asks each one of us to look into our souls for what we have misplaced. For some, indeed, it is enthusiasm, or hope, or a passion for God's mission. For others, it will be other things. But the gospel question this morning

is directed to all of us: What are you in danger of misplacing that needs to be found? What in your life is worth sweeping the floors looking for. What lost sheep in your life makes you want to wander the hills of your soul looking to re-claim it? The answer will be different for each of us. But what I assure you on this day, what the gospel assures you, is that you do not do that searching alone. For the ground of all our seeking and the basis for all our hope is the amazing grace of God known to us through Jesus Christ. It is because of God's grace that we know that our lives and destinies and salvation are not dependent on us. For succeed or fail, we are loved. Succeed or fail, what we do and who we are has eternal significance in the very life of God. Succeed or fail, God is with us.

For, when all is said and done and we turn back to these two little parables, what we find is this: that shepherd urgently searching for his lost sheep, and that woman urgently seeking her vanished coin, are in fact portraits of God -- for it is God who comes looking for you and me, and it is God the good shepherd who searches and searches and will not give up. And it is God who celebrates when we are found, when we are grasped by the vision of what could be, what might be, for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ. For once, we were lost, but now we can be found. And for that great good news let us say "thanks be to God." Amen.