

"Rejoice with me..."

Luke 15:6

A Sermon by Rev. Derek Elphick

We experience loss in a variety of different ways. It might be the loss of our physical strength and health.

Or the loss of our youthful energy and enthusiasm;
Or the loss of innocence and trust;
Or the loss of a job or the end of a close relationship;
Or the loss of optimism and hope;
Or the loss of loved ones and friends.

How we *interpret* these losses is the subject of our sermon today because loss, contrary to the appearance, isn't always the end - it's often the beginning, and the catalyst for something deeper and more profound.

As we grow older it can certainly *appear* as if we're losing everything that's important to us. Our bodies grow old and tired. We can't remember or do the things we once could. Those we love are suddenly, unexpectedly, taken from us. And yet in the midst of this changing landscape something deeply profound and magical is happening inside us. A miracle is unfolding. This miracle is our re-birth. It's the miracle of spiritual transformation that's been unfolding in us for years, slowly, imperceptibly, within our hearts and minds.

This is the *real* person, not the person we see in the mirror. A mirror won't reveal all of the spiritual change that is happening inside us. It won't show us how our tastes and sensibilities have grown and matured over the years. It won't show us how our priorities have changed. The mirror won't show us the ways in which we've become less superficial, less selfish, and more giving. It won't reflect back to us the happy, joyful news that the Lord and this church and our friends and family have come to mean so much to us that we can't actually put the feeling into words.

This is why the Lord in His Word *encourages* us, *implores* us, to push past the *appearance* that our losses are the end or that life in this world seems to be nothing more than a cruel sequence of events in which we gradually relinquish what we once had and that, therefore, growing old is about letting go of everything we once cherished. Nothing could be further from the truth which is what the parable of the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin and Lost Son seeks to explain.

We all start out life with 100 hundred sheep. Sheep represent heavenly affections and 100 represents a full measure of those affections. Throughout childhood and into adult life, the Lord gifts us with these "sheep," these precious affections for what is good and true. *Everyone* receives them. They give a person the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. They open the door of the mind to the light and warmth of heaven, to the influence and guidance of the Lord and His angels, to precious states of mind like innocence and peace, to chaste, clean thoughts and feelings, to trust and faith, and mercy and compassion, and love towards the neighbor, and a belief in God and the afterlife and the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. In other words, the 100 sheep represent our "lifeline" to redemption, to the hidden realm of the spiritual world that empowers us to think and love in the way the Lord has *created* us to think and love.

And then 1 sheep goes missing. In the parable, the man leaves the 99 sheep to go in search of the 1 lost sheep. Our worldly, sophisticated mind might say, "big deal" - 1 sheep goes missing, you've still got 99 but this type of reaction, this type of crude judgment, is precisely what gets us into trouble. The lost sheep represents a lost ideal. We cannot afford to lose sight of the ideals of heaven like a belief in God or the afterlife or marriage or the power of the Lord's Word to save us from our own selfishness because these ideals are the fuel that keeps us going - and without that fuel we will almost certainly give up. This is why there is great rejoicing. When the man finds his lost sheep it says, *"he lays it on his shoulder rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost' (Luke 15:5-6).*

We also start out life with 10 silver coins. A silver coin represents the truths of the Lord's Word and the number 10, like the number 100, represents a full measure of these truths. Throughout childhood and on into adult life, we acquire many truths from the Lord's Word. We learn about the purpose of creation, the history of the Lord's special churches on earth, Divine Providence, freedom of choice, repentance, charity, the doctrine of use, the true nature of love, mercy and forgiveness.

These 10 silver coins, these Divine truths, give us the ability to think in the Lord's light. They enable us to think like the angels of heaven because the Lord has, miraculously, given us the rational ability to raise our intellect above our native will, above our ego, into the light of heaven itself (see DLW 413-414)! Everyone has been given this ability, this clarity of thought, this freedom, if they wish to exercise it.

And then 1 silver coin goes missing. In this second parable, the woman immediately lights a lamp and frantically sweeps the house until she finds the 1 lost coin. Again, our worldly, sophisticated mind might conclude that losing 1 coin when you still have

9 left isn't a great loss, but this isn't how the Lord tells the story. It says, "*and when she found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I lost*" (Luke 15:9). There is great rejoicing because Divine truth is the means of our salvation. It's the only key that can unlock the door to true peace and happiness. It's the only key that enables us to gain a true sense of belonging, a true sense of community, a true sense of living for something bigger than ourselves - without it we stumble in the darkness. In other words, we realize that if we don't light a lamp and sweep the floor of our mind in search of that 1 lost coin, we might as well throw away the keys to heaven.

And lastly, like the prodigal son, we make mistakes and seek the Lord's forgiveness. This happens in childhood and continues on into adulthood. We go out into the world, to a "far country," and waste our "inheritance." We have our moments of arrogance, of sinfulness, when we think we know better than anyone else, including the Lord, and let selfish, material wants and needs get the better of us but then, mercifully, we, like the prodigal son, "come to ourselves" and take responsibility for what we've done. We acknowledge the hurt we've caused ourselves and others and seek the Lord's forgiveness which is freely and generously given in the form of the new robe, ring and sandals and fatted calf. But in this last parable, a new dimension is added, the presence of the older brother.

Understanding the role of the "older brother" who was not prepared to join in the celebration of his younger brother who was "lost and found again" (Luke 15:32) reveals an important lesson. It explains the hidden reason why we are tempted to interpret the loss of precious things in our lives so harshly and negatively. In the historical context, the older brother represents the Pharisees and scribes to whom the parable was addressed. All they could do was find fault, accuse and condemn. They had no forgiveness in their hearts. They didn't care one bit about *who* or *what* was lost. As far as they were concerned, the younger brother in the parable could *stay* lost!

On a deeper level, and in the context of our own spiritual work, the Pharisees and scribes represent the evil spirits from hell who very much seek to keep us lost and in the dark. They act like thieves in the night and try to snatch away from us the heavenly treasures we've been talking about today.

In our recitation this morning we recited together the Lord's words from the gospel of John: *My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish...*" and it ended with these incredibly important words, *"...neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand"* (10:27-28). It's useful and helpful to think of evil spirits as thieves, as being ready to snatch away from us what is represented by the lost sheep, the lost coin, and lost son. As one teaching in our

church says, the evil spirits of hell seek to "*break through the wall of our mind*" and cast out all our knowledge of the Lord and heaven and the life of charity (see AE 193:4). Nothing is more important than for us to go in search of the precious things we lose in life and not stop until we find them again because it is in finding them again that we discover their true significance and value. Yes, we may lose our physical strength and health over time but the Lord promises to substitute that with a new kind of strength and vitality - a strong and courageous heart that will "fear no evil."

Yes, we may lose our youthful energy and optimism but the Lord is waiting to give us a new kind of energy and optimism and one that is far deeper and richer than what we had before. And just because we lose the trust and innocence of our childhood doesn't mean that a new kind of innocence and trust won't be found if we go out in search of it. Or just because our belief in God or marriage or the afterlife may get lost in the stormy seas of life doesn't mean that these ideals can't be rekindled.

This explains why there is great rejoicing in all three parables. Life is about change. It's about learning from our mistakes. It's about being re-born and becoming like little children again. It's about learning to be humble enough to say, "I don't know" or "I'm sorry." It's about admitting that we've been lost but thanks to the Lord and the support of loved ones and friends, we've found our way again. This explains why, as we read in our lesson today, "*nothing gives [the Lord and His angels] greater delight and happiness than removing evil from us and leading us to heaven. This is their joy*" (AC 5992). It is their joy to do this because they see what we do not see. They work to restore what evil seeks to snatch away and hide. We see what appears to be the end; they see what is, in reality, the beginning.

One of the most painful losses in life is the loss of a loved one, and yet the teachings of our church make it so clear that we will, in the Lord's good time, meet again. Our final lesson today said that contrary to the appearance, we take with us to the other side "*everything to the point that it would be inaccurate to say we have lost anything of our life after death, except our earthly body*" (HH 461).

Let us thank the Lord for helping us *interpret* the losses we experience in life in the way He intends. The "loss" of the important things in life are not the end, but the beginning. They are the catalyst for change, the catalyst for a new and changed life, and one that becomes deeper, richer and more profound.

This is why the Lord encourages us to say to one other, "*Rejoice with me...*" for I have found what I lost.

Amen.

Lessons: Luke 15, AC 5992, HH 461