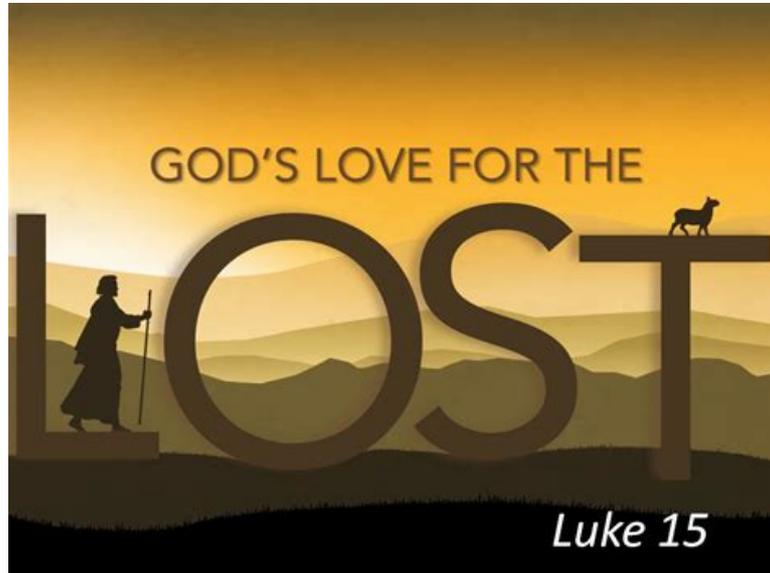

Lost Sheep & Coin.

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 21 September

Psalm 14:1-3 • Luke 15:1-10



Let's pray: Lord Jesus as we open your Word this morning, may be indeed be your Word to us. We ask that your Holy Spirit might enlighten and enliven our hearts and minds, amen.

Before we look at the two parables this morning let's highlight briefly the importance of context because the situation Jesus is addressing is the reason he tells the stories he does.

It's true to say there are many passages that we will not understand, or we will come to a wrong conclusion, if we don't know the context or the wider picture.

It's like that with many things in life.

For example, we might wonder why a normally amenable and gentle natured friend is short and impatient with us. We might second guess ourselves, jump to all sorts of conclusions and assume we've done something to offend them.

Until that is, we find out our friends partner has just been made redundant, and they are beside themselves, wondering how they are going to cope.

Knowing our friends situation means we firstly, we don't take it personally, secondly, we might be in a better position to help.

Another more personal example. I discovered a couple years ago, at 65, that I have a thing called Aphantasia. That means that when I close my eyes and try to picture something, it's a blank screen, nothing.

I'm mind blind. I don't see images. I think them. Put me in a CT scanner and ask me to imagine the face of one of my children and a different part of my brain will light up from 97% of the population.

Up to discovering this reasonably late in life, I couldn't understand why I couldn't commit things to memory by visualising study notes.

When I did my theological degree over 30 years ago, I prepared as many of the other students did. I made mind maps and marked headings with highlighters. Hopefully in the exam room, I could visualise and recall so as to shape my essay answer.

But no matter how much I tried, my mind would be blank. I could not visualise my study notes. In hindsight it might be a gift, because I have to understand something reasonably well to recall it.

This inability to recall visually, has also meant over my ministry I have struggled, and been deeply embarrassed at times, because I sometimes find it hard to put a name to face, even when I know that face well.

I realised the extent of this just over a year ago. I was priest in charge at Northwest Parish standing at the door greeting people before the service.

I spied a new face and young face all by herself several folk back in the line. It's always an encouragement to see visitors, more so when they become regulars.

Anyway I was greeting the line of folk, and they were next in line after the person I was greeting, and I was thinking what I would say. I suddenly realised, it was Jessica, my daughter. She had done her hair and makeup differently. It was her beautiful smile that gave it away.

I love my daughter. I see her often. I have her photos on my wall. And yet that day, just for a while, I didn't make the connection. If I had not recently discovered that I have aphantasia, I may have been somewhat concerned over my mental acuity.

So, if I'm talking to someone and I seem a little bit perplexed. I might be thinking like crazy trying to put a name to a face. If you understand that about me, it may help in not taking it personally, if I have a temporary mind blank.

Just so, there are many passages in scripture that might be hard to make sense of without the background or the wider context. In ch 15 we find three stories. The lost sheep. The lost coin and what could be called the lost son.

The three 3 stories are Jesus answer to the grumbling of the religious leaders who are very unhappy that Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners.

At its heart Jesus stories are making sure we understand the gospel in respect to what it is that makes us acceptable.

To one group, the religious leaders, being acceptable was about keeping the rules and keeping good company. That basically meant people like themselves.

To Jesus, being, and or, becoming acceptable, was about understanding the goodness and grace of God. That which takes the unworthy, the unacceptable, and changes their status and standing before God.

In the culture of the day to host and eat with someone was the clearest and most public way of saying you are welcome, accepted, forgiven, honoured, trusted. Even our own culture, we wouldn't invite someone into our home for a meal unless we accepted them and wanted to get to know them. Much more so in Jesus day.

Jesus was accepting people that the religious leaders believed were unacceptable. They even had a list of acceptable jobs. Tax collectors were not on the list. Neither were shepherds.

So Jesus addressing these religious leaders, ones who certainly considered themselves as being at the top of the social and moral pile, the most worthy and acceptable; Jesus addressing them as if they were shepherds, was a direct challenge to the way they valued and categorised people.

To say to a religious leader, "which one of you having a hundred sheep and loosing one of them" would be a little like addressing a policeman, or a judge, as if they were a drug dealer, and saying "when you did that drug deal, you didn't count the money and you got ripped off".

Here's a question. Who doesn't like to be accepted?

Evan the radicals tend to hang out together, acting and dressing alike to fit in. Remember the denim clad, long haired flower power Woodstock hippies of the 60s.

Or the studded leather jackets and short hair of the 70s punks. Hippies, counter cultural. Punks, anti social.

Both dressed and acted in a way to fit their peer group.

We all need to be needed. We all need to fit in. We all need to be valued and loved.

That need, of course, can lead to a couple of negative ways of trying to fit in, or be accepted and acceptable.

Think of the perfectionist. One who is never satisfied with how well they do.

Think of the performance driven person.

Regrettably, folk can spend their lives trying to prove themselves. Especially if they haven't been encouraged or have had negative things said to them through life. They say for every negative thing that is said about someone it takes 7 positive things to counter it.

Add to that the fact that our whole economic structure at heart is based on a system of winners and losers. How many people spend their lives working and accumulating things to somehow prove their worth?

It doesn't Work? If we play by the rules of the world alone, I guarantee that it will lead to a number of things such as, disappointment, resentment, depression or disillusionment.

Let's step into the spiritual dimension and ask how might we get acceptable? From the gospel perspective we have a problem. Our unworthiness, alienation and separation from God, because of the holiness of God, and the sinfulness of humanity.

Let's look at two potential answers to that problem.

One a gospel answer. One a religious answer.

Answer A: the religious answer. We make the grade. We reach the standard. We hit the mark. How we do that is by a perfect attainment of all the rules and regulations the law.

The trouble is the religious law keeping answer is loaded against us. To keep the law perfectly we would have to be as good a God.

Psalm 14, of which we heard a portion of before our gospel reading makes our situation clear. “They have all gone astray. They are all alike perverse. There is no one who does good. No not one.”

Answer B. The gospel answer. God does it for us.

So do you think the religious leaders judgemental attitudes that Jesus is challenging would be promoting A, performance and perfection, or B, God does it for us.

They were definitely in the camp that says we get right with God by doing the right stuff. Hanging out with the right crowd. And definitely not hanging out with the wrong crowd.

Did you notice it? The story of the lost sheep and the lost coin end with the mention of the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. So how can a lost sheep or a lost coin repent? All they do is get lost and get found.

What’s that all about? Context again. Jesus is again challenging the religious system that had turned repentance into a work. He is challenging the tendency that we might have to pat ourselves on the back because we’ve said sorry to God.

The first two parables are in a sense part of a demolition job. We should know about that in Christchurch. After the earthquake, if a building had foundations that were crooked and distorted, you couldn’t build a new building on those foundations. You had to demolish the building and start again.

That in a sense is what Jesus is doing in the first two stories. The Pharisees, as they sat in judgement, showed that their understanding of who God is, and how you get right with God was somewhat broken, crooked, and distorted.

Contrast the gospel as it points to God’s grace, and the work of the cross. God doing for us what we can not do for ourselves however hard we try.

Where I want is to land this morning is simply the goodness of God that accepts the unacceptable and more than that makes us acceptable. That is the good news.

The better we understand and appreciate the nature of the gospel, the more we will be filled with a sense of gratitude, hope and freedom. Contrast following Jesus motivated by guilt, duty, performance, or fear.

The religious leaders, at least the ones Jesus is addressing here, are bound by law and works. It’s performance and perfectionism.

In another place Jesus says “You lay burdens too heavy to bear and don't lift a finger to help“. Instead, Jesus who offers grace and freedom says, “come to me all who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest”.

Option A, we make the grade.

Option B, Jesus makes the grade for us.

One of those options is definitely better news than the other. It's not just a message that needs to be heard and understood by those who would not darken the doors of a church.

In 40 or so years of ministry it seems to me there are many inside the church that need to understand the gospel. It's not about what we do but what God graciously and generously does for us in and through the work of Jesus.

To finish:

Not keeping a set of rules and regulations but, turning to Jesus and trusting in him.

Not thinking we are better than anyone else, but being thankful, and living lives of humility and service.

Not taking advantage of the freedom we have, but like the searcher in the first two parables, and the father in the third, we do everything we can to find and restore those who are lost.

Just as Jesus did for us, all the way to the cross.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus help us to be more like you. To see with your eyes. Serve with your heart. That we, and those around us, may truly understand and experience the good news of the gospel, amen.