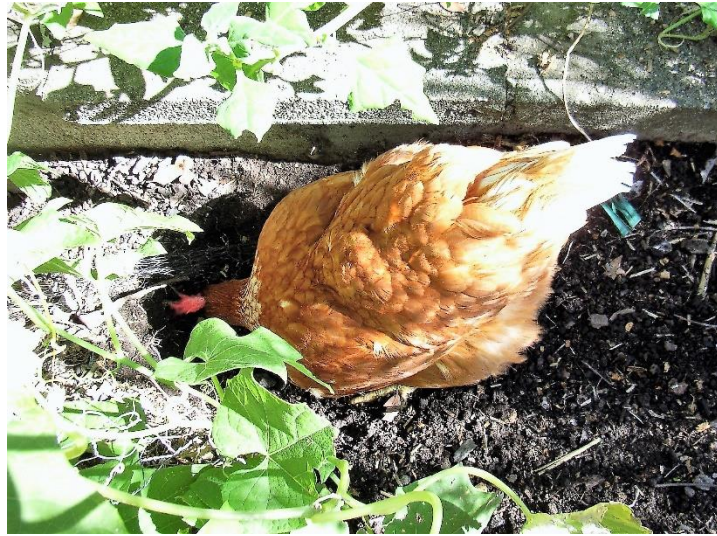


Gone Missing - Seeking the Lost



The industrious little hen above is busy searching, not for something lost, but certainly to find something! Losing and finding is part of everyday life. In Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables to challenge us, that draw on this common experience. Jesus' first parable is about someone who has lost a sheep, then a woman who has lost a coin, and finally a father who lost two sons. The missing sheep, one among 100, is noticed. Quite a feat when you think about it! The man leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness, a risky action, while he goes off and eventually finds the one missing. The woman who lost her coin, one of 10, searches carefully in dark places until she finds it. The sheep and coin are both returned to where they belong and everyone rejoices.

The situation of the father with two sons is more complex, and the story unfinished. The younger son who was lost returns home. He is welcomed and embraced by his father without needing to voice his rehearsed words of repentance. A great feast is immediately prepared to celebrate his homecoming. The older brother is out in the field. He suddenly hears music and dancing in the house, and is incensed when told it is because his brother has returned. He is only too aware of all the hurt and shame his younger brother has caused the family, and refuses to join in the festivities.

The same father, who let his younger son go off with his inheritance and watched out for him every day until he ran to meet him on his return, now

notices the absence of his older son from the feast. He leaves the celebrations to find him and bring him in. The older son, explains to his father that he has been faithfully doing his work for years and no one seemed to care. He judges the welcome extended by his father to the younger son as unwarranted and unjust. The father pleads with his son to rejoice and be happy because the whole family can now be together again.

We are not told of the son's response. By not completing the story Jesus invites us, the readers, to apply it to our lives and work out the end. All three parables confront the situation of something being lost - a sheep, a coin and two sons. The desired goal is to restore them to their rightful place; in the flock, in the necklace and in the family.

In families, in the church and in the world generally, communities of people often become fractured and divided, with individuals or small groups on the edges, or lost.

When members of our family are in conflict with one another we can feel responsible and try to reconcile differences. Divisions also exist in church families, and have from the beginning. In the gospels we read that Jesus rebuked his disciples for arguing about who was the greatest in Luke 9:46. And in Luke 9:49 John and the others with him tried to stop someone, (on the edges?), casting out demons in the name of Jesus. Later, in the life of the early church, Paul, in 1 Corinthians, needed to address serious divisions among the Christians in Corinth.

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed for unity and oneness among his followers, a unity of love such as between himself and his Father (John 17:23).

All of us are broken in some way, with weaknesses as well as strengths that annoy others and can develop into clashes that divide. Yet in these parables and Jesus' prayer, we are challenged to work towards unity. It is not a unity of making all the same but a unity where differences, which disturb us and our comfortable places, are accepted and in the end might strengthen the whole. It is a unity in which giving and receiving take place and all feel responsible for one another because we belong to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Acting to bring about reconciliation without violence or permanent separation,

involves listening to others, and working to heal their hurts and the pain they cause others. As we try to care for those most damaged we can feel a bit like the father in the parable going from one son to the other! It is a distressing and lengthy business for all involved, but when anyone is absent from the whole, we all suffer loss.

Jesus commanded us to love our neighbours. Neighbours can be the people next door, family members, church members, friends, strangers *and* difficult 'others'. But to love and eventually restore those who cause division in a community, can make a group awkward, no longer relaxed, unable to nurture members and do its ministry, or does it?

Can these three parables of Jesus, challenge us to notice anyone who is 'lost' or has gone missing and to seek and find him or her and bring them back? Can we in the end rejoice and believe the whole is benefitted when one who is different or difficult returns? I suggest that this can happen only with much prayer, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, and when we are open to be changed ourselves.

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