

## "Do You Know the Way?"

I Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

September 10, 2017 – 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

I love those old 1930's films in black and white. They make up the primary fare on Turner Classic Movies. Often their simplicity and directness tell a story better than today's requisite for subplots, violence, and sex.

Classic films often repeated successful elements that made their way into many pictures. One favorite ploy was to take some urban sophisticate, generally from New York, and place him in the wilds of New England. More often than not the city slicker got his comeuppance from his rural cousin.

I don't recall the movie this scene is from, but it has a fellow in a tuxedo motoring around in a streamline convertible. He seems to be getting nowhere, so he spots a farmer and stops to ask him for directions.

"I say, friend, does this road lead to New York?"

"Wouldn't know," said the farmer.

"Well, does it lead to Boston?"

"Wouldn't know," said the farmer.

"Well, does it lead to Hartford?"

"Wouldn't know," said the farmer.

"Well, what do you know?"

"Well.. know that *I'm* not lost!"

Our two short parables today also have to do with being lost. They are directed to those who are lost in life, and know it; but these parables are also intended for those who are lost, and don't even realize it. Jesus likely used these two stories together, for they make an identical point and reinforce each other.

The first three verses in our text from Luke set the stage. They tell us that tax collectors and sinners were among those who came to listen to what Jesus was teaching. In fact, the gospels make it clear that those whom society considered "undesirables" made up a sizeable portion of those attracted to Jesus. What's more, Jesus welcomed such people around him and even to eat with him.

In those days being at table with others was considered intimate. You didn't sit down with just anybody. Moreover, you didn't even associate with those whose reputation was tinged.

The Pharisees and Scribes prided themselves on following the letter of the Law and of avoiding questionable people lest their reputation be tainted. So eating with “bad” people is just about the last thing they would want to do. They are critical of Jesus because he does that. They aren’t soft spoken in their criticism, either.

Try to picture Jesus teaching outdoors. All sorts of folks are around him. There’s his disciples of course; but also a mixture of peasants, artisans, tradesmen, and even some who seem to be quite prosperous. There’s shepherds, donkey drivers, peddlers, thieves, and prostitutes. Then there’s also the “religious police” standing at the periphery of the crowd. You can tell who they are. They’re the ones who **aren’t** smiling.

Picture Jesus looking straight at the righteous Scribes and Pharisees as he begins: “Friends, suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them—what do you do? You leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and go looking for the lost one until you find it. When you locate that sheep, you’re so happy that you put it on your shoulders and carry it back home. Then you call your friends and neighbors together and say to them, ‘I’m happy that I’ve found my lost one. Let’s celebrate!’

“Or suppose a woman who has ten silver coins loses one of them—what does she do? She lights a lamp, sweeps her house, and looks carefully everywhere until she finds it. When she discovers the coin, she calls her friends and neighbors together, and says to them, ‘I’m ecstatic because I found the coin that I lost. Let’s celebrate!’”

I wonder how many of those who heard his words that day understood his intention? It wasn’t just the value of the lost sheep that caused the shepherd to set out on his search. It was the fact that it belonged to him and that, without his help, it couldn’t find its way back to the flock.

In the second story the ten coins were probably worn on the woman’s headdress and were part of her dowry. This was likely her most prized possession, both for its actual and sentimental value. Without her diligent search, the coin would be lost for good.

Through the decisive action of the two people, the sheep and the coin were found. Without their efforts the lost items would have been permanently separated from where they belong and to whom they belong.

Of course Jesus’ purpose here has nothing to do with either animals or money. They’re only symbolic illustrations. What Jesus intends, and makes known through these parables, is that God desires those who are lost to return and that it is his particular mission to call them, to search for them, to take them spiritually back home. That’s what he is set apart to do. That’s why Jesus does what he does.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that some of the first who respond to Jesus are those who have strayed the farthest away, for it’s they who most realize the anguish in their lives. They know they’re lost, continually drifting, without purpose or meaning, unhappy and incomplete. They realize they have nowhere to go but up. Yet, until they meet Jesus, they don’t know how or even where to begin. Then he shows them the way by reaching out to them personally and affirming them in love. He tells them that they have value and that God awaits them eagerly.

What amazing news to hear! No wonder that pimps and carousers, thieves and brawlers, give their lives over to him. It's as if they have literally been born again, for everything is now changed about their lives. They're given a second chance. They find here what they had been seeking elsewhere in vain.

Returning momentarily to old movies, one of the biggest stars from the 30's was W. C. Fields. In most of his films he plays a lovable rascal who's nimble of tongue and quick of wit, but definitely a curmudgeon. In one picture he's flying through the clouds in an early predecessor to the helicopter. Suddenly he notices that his supply of beer is running out, so he lands on the roof of a hotel somewhere in China.

Fields gets out of the craft and asks the curious people where he is. "You're in Wu Hu," comes the reply. He looks a bit perplexed, then says rather disgustedly, "I'm looking for Kansas City."

Someone in the crowd answers politely "You are lost, sir,".

Taking offense at this, Fields stands up straight, throws out his chest, and bellows, "My good man, Kansas City is lost! *I* am here."

And so this "me-centered" attitude leads to the other thrust of the two parables. Jesus' stories are intended as well for those who are confident and caught up in themselves, who feel so smug that they believe the world revolves around them. They don't realize that they, too, might be lost.

The Pharisees were a secure lot. They kept all the formalities of religion. They were good and they knew it. They were also judgmental because, in their own minds, they were assured of their righteousness. What could this itinerant preacher, this Jesus from backwater Nazareth, teach them?

Jesus uses these parables as a response to the criticism that he is eating with despised sinners, because he wants his accusers to see that they, too, stand in need of repentance, of finding their way back to God. Jesus invites them to open their eyes and hearts that they may come to discover what the outcasts already see so clearly.

Now there's not much opportunity to observe sheep in the city. If we could we'd notice that they just wander along rather oblivious to danger. They move from one tuft of grass to another, rarely looking up to see where they're going. Only when the day is drawing to a close do they discover that they may have nibbled their way lost. Even then they may not realize their predicament.

The truth is that any one of us can stray, any one of us can move away from God and hardly notice it. There are days when any one of us might stop and look up and find that the landscape is unfamiliar and disquieting. It's times like this that, deep inside, you know something's wrong. Where you are is not where you want to be.

At such a time as this I want you to remember that Jesus is the shepherd of humanity. In God's name he calls us into the divine presence. He bids us to look up and discover where we are spiritually, then he extends his hand to us and says gently, "Come, I'll show you the

way. Don't be frightened for I have already laid down my life once on your behalf. Come and follow me and I will show you how. Come and I'll help you find the security that only God's presence in your life can give you. I can get you back on stride."

Jesus' mission was to save those who knew they were lost. His mission was also to save others who didn't even realize they were lost. His mission was to everyone, and it remains so even today.

Jesus is there for us and ready to show us the way... to show us the way home where we belong.