

The parable of the lost sheep got me thinking about my relationship with my three Shetland Sheepdogs. It's as if a parallel to this parable happens whenever I walk out of the back door to come over here and when I return to the back door in the middle or at the end of the day. I leave to two sets of eyes saying "bye Mom, we'll miss you, come back soon" and one set of eyes glazed over in fear "don't go through that door – you disappear and I'll never see you again – stooooooooop!" Later, as I approach the door, there is celebratory barking "She's back. Hooray. We're all home together again. Let's eat!"

Dogs are pack animals. They don't like having their community interrupted. They don't like it when I leave, but love it when I return. And, it takes a bit of getting used to when someone new shows up. They don't like it at first, but eventually they settle down and accept the new people as a part of the pack that might feed them under the table.

There is something incredible about the unconditional love of a dog. I know it's true of other species for other people, but my experience is that no other being on earth will put up with me like my dogs do.

I forgive them for their little boo boos on the rug when they get stressed out.

They forgive me for leaving them each day and just restart the love machine when

I get home. I was lost and now I'm found. Hallelujah!

The parables in this reading from Luke make it plain to the Pharisees and scribes who have gathered to eat with Jesus that there is always room for one more at the table. Can't you hear Jesus say, "Skootch over Abner, my tax collector friend Matthew has arrived and is joining us for dinner." Or, "Caleb, please offer your seat to this woman of questionable reputation." The grumbling ensues.

Then, of course, Jesus hears the grumbling. Probably not first hand. Grumblers like to triangulate and whine to someone else instead. And, so he calls everyone to attention. Those unaware of Jesus' parable-telling tactics turn to the rabbi with great expectation. Those who are aware of these tactics turn away and try to make themselves small. They know what's to come.

“What do people do when they lose something of value?” he asks. A shepherd leaves his flock to search for one lost sheep. A woman sweeps her entire house to look for one lost coin.

Here’s how the people at the table may have heard these tales:

Interpretation A: One sheep equals one silver coin. Wow. That means that those ninety-nine sheep are worth a bundle. Why would anyone risk life and limb to rescue one one-hundredth of what is entrusted to you when you would have to leave all of the rest of the treasure behind? That makes no sense.

Interpretation B: The woman lost a coin in the house. It was one-tenth of all she had saved. Instead of just looking, she cleaned the house in addition to searching for the coin. Then, she spends that money on a party to celebrate finding it. That makes no sense.

What’s happening here is that the hearers of the parables identified themselves with the individuals who were searching for their lost items. In being the rescuer, they would be the hero or the gracious party thrower. It’s just that that’s not what Jesus was trying to get them to understand.

What turns these stories into parables, the idea that turns everything upside down, is that Jesus wants us to see ourselves not as the finders, but as the items that are lost. We are not the seekers. We are the sought. That revelation means we must reevaluate our relationship with God and with each other.

We are the sought. We only think that we have come here on our own. We are here because God in Christ has sought us out and called us here. We all are here for a reason. No one person holds all the gifts needed in this community. Each one of us has been given something that strengthens our common life. God has brought us here for God's purposes. We are all invited to the table.

Of course, an open table to which all are invited is difficult for some. The Pharisees and scribes certainly didn't like it. They preferred to believe that they were a little better than the common slave. Sitting around a table with tax collectors and sinners didn't square with their sense of privilege. They would never admit that, of course, but it was there in their attitudes and posturing and grumbling. Therefore, Jesus told not one but two parables to shake their foundations.

The grumblers heard two stories of lost things being sought. In one case, the seeker was a shepherd. In the other, the seeker was a woman. Therefore, the lost were searched for by two people of the lowest standing in society. They were the ones who were considered lost by the authorities. They shouldn't be placed in the position of the savior (metaphorically speaking). And, not only that: the saving searchers were male and female. That would have been the last straw for the temple authorities: the Divine was of both genders. Scandalous.

We come away from this gospel passage with several revelations:

- God seeks us.
- God values us. We are worthy to be sought after.
- God welcomes everyone to the table. Some people aren't going to like that very much.

Therefore:

- We should seek God in return.
- We should value all people as God values us.
- We should invite everyone to the table. Even the people with whom we disagree or dislike.

We're called to be a community that welcomes the lost, the lonely, the seeker, and the sought. Everyone has a place at the table, even if they don't agree with you. No matter where you are in your life journey, God has called you here for a purpose. We join in community to help each other find our purposes and help discern what it is that we should do to further those purposes. We are here to

learn from each other, listen to each other, be transformed by each other. In the gathered community Christ is present in word and sacrament and in the body congregated here.

We also come together to be strengthened for the journey outside these doors.

There we seek and serve Christ in the persons who may feel unworthy to be at table with us. We go to assure them of their value. We go to feed them, to slake their thirst, give them shelter and encouragement. And, like my homecoming to my four-footed friends, we're welcomed back each week with great celebration.

You're back. Hooray. We're all home together again. Let's eat.

Amen.