

## Seeking the Lost

A Sermon by the Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.  
Glenview New Church—January 10, 2010

**“Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.” (Luke 15:6)**

**“Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost.” (Luke 15:9)**

**“My son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:24)**

Some of you may have heard this story before, but listen to it again if you have.

*There was a little boy with a bad temper. His father gave him a bag of nails and told him that every time he lost his temper, to hammer a nail in the back fence. The first day the boy had driven 37 nails into the fence. Then it gradually dwindled down. He discovered it was easier to hold his temper than to drive those nails into the fence. Finally the day came when the boy didn't lose his temper at all. He told his father about it and the father suggested that the boy now pull out one nail for each day that he was able to hold his temper. The days passed and the young boy was finally able to tell his father that all the nails were gone. The father took his son by the hand and led him to the fence. He said, “You have done well, my son, but look at the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say things in anger, they leave a scar, just like this one” (Unknown author, from [www.skywriting.net](http://www.skywriting.net)).*

This is not a sermon about anger, but I wonder how many of you will remember the story a week or two from now. Take another story:

*A minister told his congregation, “Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you understand the upcoming sermon, I would like for all of you to read Mark 17 before next Sunday.” The following Sunday, as he prepared to deliver his sermon, the minister asked for a show of hands. “How many people did as I requested and read Mark 17 before coming here today?” Hands shot up all over the room. The minister smiled and said, “Mark has only sixteen chapters. I will now proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying.” (from [www.revtoms.homestead.com/Mark17](http://www.revtoms.homestead.com/Mark17))*

Effective teachers know the power of a good story. The message is one thing, but if that message becomes real in the life of human beings, we see it more clearly, and remember it much longer.

Jesus, the Master Teacher, used stories or parables to get His eternal messages across. Today we turn our attention to three of those stories, and ask ourselves, what are the messages we need to hear by means of them?

The stories we focus on today have a recurring theme. A man has a hundred sheep, but one of them gets separated from the flock. So he leaves the ninety-nine and goes looking for the one. When he finds it, he lays it on his shoulders, comes home, calls together his friends and neighbors, and says to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost” (Luke 15:6). You've heard this story before. Let's analyze it on its literal merits. Is it logical? Would a shepherd act in this way? Would this story square with the mindset of the listeners? In this case, the listeners are Pharisees and scribes who saw Jesus interacting with “tax collectors and sinners”—an antagonistic

audience (Luke 15:1-2). Intimately aware of who He was talking to, the Lord sought to draw a striking contrast. Their attitude to the tax collectors and sinners was one of judgment, even excommunication. They had the authority to throw people out of the Church, as they did with the man born blind whom Jesus healed (John 9). Harnessing this deep contrast between their attitude and His own, He described the lengths He will go to, to help those who need it most. While they looked with scorn at the people they called sinners, He taught, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just person who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

Jesus didn't stop there. Still working with these skeptical people, He brought the subject-matter into another familiar realm to them: money. The second story He told is along the same lines. A woman has ten silver coins, but she loses one. So she "lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until she finds it." Then she too calls her friends and neighbors together and rejoices over her recovered wealth (Luke 15:8-10). Valuing money is something these people could identify with. In one sense, we could see them sweeping the house for a lost coin. But would they put the same energy in the amending their own lives?

Finally he tells a story about a lost human being. A man had two sons, one of whom got into a lot of trouble. He asked his father for his inheritance, and then moved far away from home, spending it all on "prodigal living" (Luke 15:13). You know the story. He went broke and became destitute, eating the food of pigs, until he came to his senses, and decided to return home. He intended to become a servant in his father's house, but he was greeted by a rejoicing father, who put a robe on him and held a banquet in his honor. Why this third story about "lost and found?" Here is a human being who would be categorized by the Pharisees and scribes as "a sinner," yet in Jesus' eyes he was a human lost sheep, and was more precious than a silver coin. As we hear the father saying to his older son, "It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found" (Luke 15:32).

Jesus could have simply told the Pharisees and scribes that all people are precious to Him, no matter what they've done, and that a central part of His mission is to reach out to those who need amendment in their lives (even as He was reaching out to them). Instead He chose to couch this message in some stories, which have become some of the most enduring and memorable of all time. The Master Teacher wrapped up this message of mercy in this particular packaging so that we could come to understand one of the central truths of eternity: Our God is a God of infinite mercy.

**Deeper implications.** Unlike the stories we began with, there is a level of coherence and depth in these Divine stories that only the Lord could design.

You may have seen pictures of Jesus as the Shepherd, reaching down a rocky embankment to retrieve the lost sheep. The aim of these pictures, indeed the goal of the story is to portray in living form the Lord's tender love. We read in the Writings for the New Church, "Since the Lord's face is mercy, peace, and all good, it is clear that He always looks with mercy on anybody, and never turns His face away from anybody" (*Arcana Coelestia* 223). Another passage says that the Lord is "pure love, and pure mercy toward the whole human race... Thus out of pure mercy and by the mighty power of love [the Lord wills] to draw towards heaven, that is, towards [Himself], all who are

willing to follow” (*Arcana Caelestia* 1735). We note that sheep and lambs are symbols of innocence (see *Arcana Caelestia* 10132), and that innocence is a willingness to follow (*Heaven and Hell* 341). We note further that the “‘sheep that was lost and found’ stands for the good with the person who repents” (*Arcana Caelestia* 9836). As those sheep depend on the shepherd for safety, so we depend on the Lord for safety. When we stray, we separate ourselves from His protection, and there are indeed wolves or lions out there to harm us—in the form of those in this world who would take advantage of us, and in the form of evil spirits whose influence we invite into our lives by choosing to do what we know to be wrong.

As the sheep follow where the shepherd leads, so we, from innocence, are to follow the Lord—in this case by humbly realizing that we have strayed, and by repenting. Could there be any more perfect symbol of the Lord’s love than a shepherd watching over a flock of relatively helpless sheep and lambs? It is for these reasons that the Lord called Himself “the Good Shepherd,” who “knows [His] sheep,” and “gives His life for the sheep” (John 10:11-16). It is also why one of the most famous of the Psalms begins with the words, “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

With those powerful images of the Lord as the Shepherd, who will search for the lost among us, we turn to the second story of “the lost coin.” This one is not so well known. A woman searches for one of her ten coins, and when she finds it, we hear the exact same refrain: she calls her friends and neighbors to celebrate. In this case, we are invited to consider a woman, likely a widow, who will depend on that small wealth for her livelihood. It is a big deal to her that money she was counting on is missing. But the main point of this story is to carry on the theme of “lost and found.” The Lord again says that this is a story about joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10).

When we look at the symbolic meaning, we see even more connections. The woman is a symbol of “affection for the truth” (*Apocalypse Explained* 675:10). This follows from the fact that the coin is a symbol for the truth itself, which is the object of that affection (*Ibid.*). The Lord talks a lot about spiritual riches, and uses natural wealth as an analogy for what will truly enrich our lives. The one coin or truth, like about anger or lying in the stories we began with, if we are willing to search for it and recognize its value, can make a tremendous difference in our lives. It can lead us to change our behavior in healthy ways, or “repent” to use the phraseology of the story. The Lord teaches us a powerful lesson here, that dove-tails perfectly with the first story. We read in the work *Heaven and Hell*, “The Divine mercy is pure mercy towards the whole human race, to save it; and it is also unceasing towards every person, and is never withdrawn from any one, so that everyone is saved who can be saved” (no. 522). Isn’t that what we see in the story of the lost sheep? “And yet,” the passage continues, “no one can be saved except by Divine means, which means the Lord reveals in the Word. The Divine means are what are called Divine truths, which teach how a person must live in order to be saved” (*Ibid.*). This is the story of the lost coin—the spiritual riches we need to seek out and find to fully receive the Lord’s mercy.

In the Lord’s Divine wisdom, we come to a third story, which is a capstone for the previous two. It involves a particular lost sheep, and it involves riches. The prodigal or lost son is “one who has squandered spiritual riches” (*Arcana Caelestia* 9391). This

means that he knew some things about spiritual life, even about certain evils, and yet lived contrary to that knowledge. His returning to his father and his confession symbolizes “penitence of heart and humility” (*Apocalypse Explained* 279:6). Symbolically we see a person who has come to see the truth of life the hard way, by experiencing the misery of living for this world alone. What is the truth that heads him homeward? It says, “He came to himself and said... ‘I will arise and go to my father and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned...’” (Luke 15:17,18). What he find when he returns is a merciful father, who treats him much more lovingly than he had hoped for. The robe and ring given to him represent a restoration of those spiritual riches he had squandered, and the feast is a symbol of conjunction and consociation (*Apocalypse Explained* 279:6). Perhaps it doesn’t need to be said, that the father in this story symbolizes the Lord Himself, who is always ready to welcome us back, and constantly forgives, and showers us with mercy when we change our ways for good.

The number three doesn’t occur in these stories, but there are three stories in a row about lost and found. They build on each other with once central and growing theme. The Lord is a God of love and mercy. He shows us that truth in poignant stories of the shepherd, and even more so in the form of a happy reuniting of a father and son. He throws in a story about a coin, to remind us that it is the truth that is the means to receiving His mercy.

As we draw to a close, we could note that the story of the New Testament is in large part the Lord’s means of expanding on this central theme. The Lord’s goal while on earth was to show forth His Divine Love in Human form. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the one God of heaven and earth, reaches out to us even now by means of these lost and found stories. Our goal is to heed their simple beauty, and also to consider their deeper implications. We are to be innocent followers—sheep who depend on the Shepherd, and willingly follow Him where He leads; we are to energetically engage in our own spiritual welfare, specifically by seeking out those truths that we most need to find in the Lord’s Word, like the woman searching diligently for the lost coin in her home; and we are to recognize the ways in which we have or are squandering the spiritual inheritance we have received, with a goal of returning to the Lord in humility to ask that we may once again live under His care. Above all, we are to find solace in the infinite love of our God, who will always welcome us with heavenly joy whenever we change our ways for the better. Truly our God is a merciful God. **Amen.**

**Readings from the Lord’s Word.** Luke 15:1-24; *Arcana Coelestia* 223, 1735, 3063.

## **Luke 15**

<sup>1</sup>Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, “This Man receives sinners and eats with them.” <sup>3</sup>So He spoke this parable to them, saying:

<sup>4</sup>“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?

<sup>5</sup>And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. <sup>6</sup>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!’ <sup>7</sup>I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who needs no repentance.

<sup>8</sup>“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup>And when she has found it, she calls her friends and neighbors together, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!’ <sup>10</sup>Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

<sup>11</sup>Then He said: “A certain man had two sons. <sup>12</sup>And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ So he divided to them his livelihood. <sup>13</sup>And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. <sup>14</sup>But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want.

<sup>15</sup>Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. <sup>16</sup>And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup>“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, <sup>19</sup>and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”’

<sup>20</sup>“And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

<sup>22</sup>“But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; <sup>24</sup>for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”’

## ***Arcana Caelestia* 223**

Since the Lord’s face is mercy, peace, and all good, it is clear that He always looks with mercy on anybody, and never turns His face away from anybody.

## ***Arcana Caelestia* 1735**

The Most High, or Inmost [of the Lord], is the Celestial element of Love, or Love itself. Jehovah, or the Lord’s Internal, was the Celestial element itself of Love, that is, it was Love itself, to which no other attributes are appropriate than those of pure Love and so of pure Mercy towards the whole human race, that Mercy being such that it wills

to save all people, to make them eternally happy, and to impart to them all that is its Own—thus out of pure Mercy and by the mighty power of love to draw towards heaven, that is, towards Itself, all who are willing to follow. That Love itself is Jehovah. To Love alone, and to nothing else, is [the substantive verb] Am or Is truly applicable.

***Arcana Caelestia 3063***

[The words] ‘deal mercifully’ means an influx of love. This is clear from the consideration that the essence of mercy is love. Love itself is converted into mercy and becomes mercy when anyone in need of help is regarded with love or charity. Consequently mercy is the expression of love towards those who are needy and wretched. But here in the internal sense ‘mercy’ is used to mean love and ‘dealing mercifully’ an influx of love, since it was an influx from the Lord’s Divine itself into His Divine Human. In fact it was by means of Divine love that is the Lord’s that He made His Human Divine, for love is the very being (esse) of life, while Divine love exists in none but the Lord.