

**HOLY CHEETOS!**  
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BECKY ROBBINS-PENNIMAN  
CHURCH OF THE GOOD SHEPHERD, DUNEDIN, FL

Sometimes, Jesus makes us work really hard to figure out what he's saying.

The moral of the stories he tells in this passage is pretty obvious:  
there is joy in heaven when a sinner changes both heart and life.

At first glance, who is causing all the trouble in the parable?

Why, it's that lost sheep and the pesky coin.

So the lesson we're to learn is don't be getting ourselves all lost  
and making someone else clean up our mess, right?

Change our heart and life and make God happy.

How many of us have heard THAT sermon? How many have GIVEN that sermon?

Although there's even some real truth in there, there's one problem:

It doesn't make any sense in this parable;

One reason it doesn't make sense is

because getting lost is not in and of itself a sin, it's not necessarily selfishness.

Yes, sometimes it's an act of supreme stupidity, but sometimes it just happens.

Blaming the sheep and the coin for getting lost looks a lot like blaming the victim.

Another reason this parable doesn't make sense

is that the sheep and coin didn't change one lick in this story.

What on earth did that lost sheep do to change its heart and life?

Absolutely nothing. It was just . . . lost.

All we know is that the shepherd left the other 99 in a pasture

(which was not some cozy sheep pen, by the way,

but the rugged hillsides of Israel in the remotest areas away from the cities).

All the sheep were at the mercy of wild animals, and treacherous terrain,  
but that lost one was especially vulnerable.

The shepherd leaves 99 sheep who aren't lost to search in the wilderness.

He finds the sheep and puts it on his shoulders, safe at last.

The sheep did absolutely nothing to be found, only the shepherd did.

Everyone goes home: a hard job well done.

But Jesus doesn't stop there. He talks about how the shepherd feels.

He feels tremendous joy – so much joy, he just has to share it with everyone he knows.

All this joy over a lost sheep that did bupkis to make itself "worthy."

To drive the point home, Jesus tells the same story, only this time with a woman and a lost coin.

Coins can't do a darn thing to be lost OR found,  
and are even less capable than a sheep of having a change in heart and life.

Like the shepherd, the woman calls everyone she knows to rejoice with her.

Both stories in this parable are about the joy the shepherd and the woman feel  
when THEY go out and find what is lost.

Now, who do the shepherd and the woman represent in this parable?

In case the Pharisees – or any of you – are tempted to deliberately miss the point,  
Jesus makes it clear that the shepherd and the woman symbolize God.

There is joy in HEAVEN over one sinner – one lost person – being found.

God lives in heaven, and in case we choose to be REALLY dense,

Jesus throws in some angels, too.

So the moral of this story isn't about the sin of getting lost. What is it, then?

Jesus is talking to a bunch of uber-observant folks who have the resources to follow all the rigorous religious rules they've identified and who think they've absolutely nailed it in complying with them.

Rich people who think they've nailed it in God's eyes are a particularly unsavory lot as far as Jesus is concerned.

First, they are smugly satisfied that, like Mary Poppins, they're practically perfect in every way.

Next, they hoist themselves up onto pedestals, or, actually, judge's benches, and start pointing out all the imperfect folks and sniffing about them, and then the people who hang out with them.

You know, "If you lie down with the dogs, you'll get fleas."

In their view, Jesus is one seriously flea-bitten rabbi.

Jesus throws some very shrewd scriptural shade on these religious prigs when he observes that there is more joy in heaven *over one sinner who changes both heart and life*

*than over 99 righteous people who have no need to change.* Just WHO doesn't need ANY change?

Even if you're a Pharisee who tries to do it all perfectly, you'd remember that no matter how practically perfect in every way you've tried so hard to be, Torah teaches that absolutely everyone commits unknown misdeeds.

One of the Psalms by King David himself implores God: *cleanse me from my secret faults.*<sup>1</sup>

In this parable, the flea-bitten rabbi is telling those church ladies to get down off the judge's bench, because THEY are the ones who need to change their hearts and lives.

But even that isn't the deepest meaning of the story. The deepest meaning, in fact, isn't about us at all, but about the nature of God.

Even if everyone goes and does some serious heart and life changing, it's NOT our repentance that makes us worthwhile to our God; it's God's passionate love for us that makes us precious.

Anyone who has fallen in love with a damp, smelly, wailing baby, or even a stumbling pup covered in its own poop, can understand the joy our God has when God finds us and brings us home.

God loves finding all us – the needy, the poor, the helpless in the dust, as well as the smug and practically perfect in their grumbling.

If that weren't true, Jesus wouldn't have bothered telling the practically perfect this parable!

Whatever wilderness we're in, there's and rejoicing in the streets of heaven when God finds us.

So why does Jesus talk about repentance?

Because being selfish, self-serving, and greedy makes us small, tight, and arrogant.

Jesus wants us to know the joy that comes from lifting the needy up from the dust.

The change of heart and life we need is away from self-absorbed anxiety over whether we're good enough to the joy of delighting in the astonishing beauty of creation and rejoicing in the preciousness of living thing.

Jesus wants us to have that joy, too. Repentance won't make God love us more; repentance will make it so we can love more, love like God loves.

THAT'S precisely how we come smack into contact with Eternal Life, the Life of the Eternal One, the Kingdom of Heaven, the Reign of God; we learn to love like God loves while we're still crawling around on this earth.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 19:12

If YOU want that kind of joy, then take the advice from Hebrews and make a sacrifice of praise. Remember, “sacrifice” literally means to make [face] holiness [sacre]- which means imitating the shepherd, the woman – in other words, God – by making a huge, wonderful positive difference in the life of another person who, like a sheep or a coin, can never return the favor.

Let me tell you about a sacrifice I got to see this past week.

This past Friday afternoon, I got up from my sermon writing to go to my physical therapy session at Morton Plant – an old college swimming injury has reared up in my shoulder.

Coming back to Dunedin through downtown Clearwater, I was stopped at one of the 10 million lights on Fort Harrison Ave.

Walking toward the stopped cars was a homeless guy with a piece of cardboard that said, simply, HUNGRY. PLEASE HELP.

While I was still figuring out what, if anything, I wanted to do about that, the trunk of the car in front of me popped open, and a young man – still in his 20s – hopped out of the car, raced around to the back, reached in a box in the trunk, pulled out a half dozen snack-size bags of Cheetos, opened a cooler and fetched a cold Coke, raced over to the curb, handed everything to the guy with the sign, then hopped back into his car.

The guy with the sign sat down on a bench to begin his feast. The light was still red.

It all took . . . 30 seconds?

All this happened while I was still sitting there wondering what maybe I would do, which turned out to be nothing.

In fact, even though I’d JUST been reading this Gospel lesson an hour and a half earlier, my first thought was that this was NOT the healthiest feast in the world.

[FACE PALM] Ha! Pharisee alert!

The young man in the car clearly had thought this through ahead of time:

he knew where to look for lost sheep,

and he knew exactly what sacrifice he was going to make when he found one.

As the light turned green, the young man gave a friendly toot on his horn and waved at the sign guy.

The sign guy looked up from his feast of Holy Cheetos and Heavenly Coke, and happily waved back.

I sat at the light gobsmacked,

and I’m pretty sure I heard joy breaking out in heaven.

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#### COLLECT OF THE DAY

God among us, we gather in the name of your Son to learn love for one another. Keep our feet from evil paths. Turn our minds to your wisdom and our hearts to the grace revealed in your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

#### AMOS 8:4–7

Hear this, you who trample on the needy and destroy the poor of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath so that we may offer wheat for sale, make the ephah smaller, enlarge the shekel, and deceive with false balances, in order to buy the needy for silver and the helpless for sandals, and sell garbage as grain?”

The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget what they have done.

#### PSALM 113

Hallelujah! Give praise, you servants of the Lord; praise the Name of the Lord.

**Let the Name of the Lord be blessed, from this time forth for evermore.**

From the rising of the sun to its going down let the Name of the Lord be praised.

**The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.**

Who is like the Lord our God, who sits enthroned on high, but stoops to behold the heavens and the earth?

**He takes up the weak out of the dust and lifts up the poor from the ashes.**

He sets them with the princes, with the princes of his people.

**He makes the woman of a childless house to be a joyful mother of children.**

**HEBREWS 13:1–8, 15–16**

Keep loving each other like family. Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it. Remember prisoners as if you were in prison with them, and people who are mistreated as if you were in their place. Marriage must be honored in every respect, with no cheating on the relationship, because God will judge the sexually immoral person and the person who commits adultery. Your way of life should be free from the love of money, and you should be content with what you have. After all, he has said, I will never leave you or abandon you. This is why we can confidently say, *The Lord is my helper, and I won't be afraid. What can people do to me?*

Remember your leaders who spoke God's word to you. Imitate their faith as you consider the way their lives turned out. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever!

So let's continually offer up a sacrifice of praise through him, which is the fruit from our lips that confess his name. Don't forget to do good and to share what you have because God is pleased with these kinds of sacrifices.

**LUKE 15:1–10**

All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn't he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost sheep.' In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives.

"Or what woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won't light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life."

**SERMON HYMN:** *Praise the Lord, Rise Up Rejoicing*

**BLESSING:** Beloved, life is short, and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel with us, so be quick to love and make haste to be kind. As you leave this place, the blessing of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be upon you and remain with you, now and forever. Amen.