

I received two home communion kits as gifts: one when I finished seminary internship and one when I was first ordained. I use both: I try to keep one in the office and one at home so I have one handy no matter where I'm leaving from when I make a visit. But a couple months ago, I lost one, which was inconvenient, plus it had sentimental value. I looked everywhere: in every cabinet in the house, under the seats in the car, all over the church; but it was nowhere to be found. Then last week we had a Zoom meeting that I had to do from the office. As I was closing the curtains so that there wasn't a glaring backlight on the video, I found the lost communion kit behind the curtain, sitting on the window sill. I have no idea why I would have put it there; maybe if I had been cleaning off my desk, except let's be honest, I rarely clean off my desk. I would not say that when I found it I experienced quite the joy Jesus describes as the angels' response to reclaimed sinners, though I was relieved to finally have it back. But mostly I kept wondering how I had managed to lose it there in the first place.

Luke narrates the Pharisees and the scribes grumbling against Jesus for welcoming the lost causes of their society, the tax collectors and sinners. This may sound strange to us who confess that we *all* sin and fall short of the glory of God, but Luke and the scribes and Pharisees referred that way to the whole class of people who were shunned because of their professions or public actions. The Pharisees and scribes thought of themselves as fundamentally good people but these others as not even seeming to try.

So it's self-righteousness, jealousy, and greed on the part of the religious leaders to complain about Jesus socializing with outsiders. After all, the scribes and Pharisees would have dined with popular rabbis like Jesus all the time. But this one time that the tax collectors and sinners—people who would have never gotten an invitation—are welcomed in, the religious experts resent Jesus extending that welcome. Luke doesn't even give us the sense that Jesus *excluded* the scribes and Pharisees—they seem to be right there to witness what Jesus is doing. They just don't want anyone else to benefit from Jesus' presence—even though they don't seem to appreciate Jesus that much themselves.

When we hear contemporary social discussions of privilege, this scene is the biblical equivalent: people who have always had access—the Pharisees and scribes—getting angry because those who have never had access—the tax collectors and sinners—are finally included—even just once, even just a little. These grumblers sound just like people who hear “Black Lives Matter” and immediately react “All Lives Matter!” Well, yes, of course they do. But not *all* people are disproportionately struggling with systemic injustice and institutionally-supported violence because of their race, so not all people need help in that area right now. The woman in

Jesus' parable doesn't toss away the nine silver coins she has while she's looking for the one that is lost; she just doesn't need to search for what is already safe and sound. The shepherd leaves the 99 sheep who are together while he searches for the one that is on its own, not because the 99 don't matter, but because they aren't in the same danger as the one who is lost. In both cases, the seeker is trying to reunite what has been separated, not because what is lost is more precious, but because what is lost is just as valuable as all the rest. The scribes and Pharisees don't value the tax collectors and sinners as fellow children of God, made—like they are—in God's image. But Jesus certainly sees them that way.

Still, don't those sinners need to repent? It says right there that heaven and the angels rejoice at repentance, so it's up to those sinners to change. Right? But Luke doesn't tell us that Jesus welcomed *retired* tax collectors and *reformed* sinners; maybe these people did change at some point in the future, perhaps because of their encounter with the Living God, but it hasn't happened yet. Repentance was not the price of admission to Jesus. The metaphors Jesus uses here are instructive: the lost coin wasn't going to find itself. The sheep that the shepherd lays on his shoulders—maybe because it was injured, maybe because it was too sick or weak to walk—wasn't going to make it's way back into the fold on its own. But not only were the coin and the sheep not going to find themselves, they didn't lose themselves either—not any more than my communion kit put itself on the windowsill where it was forgotten for a season. Sometimes forgetfulness, carelessness, or circumstances beyond control cause people to end up lost and separated from the communities where they should be included and loved. It would be great if circumstance were better, and if communities were unfailingly careful and diligently inclusive so that nobody got lost in the first place. But we're human, and we don't work that way. So those who are lost need someone not just to search for them, but to joyfully pick them up and return them to the community that was, in truth, incomplete without them; that's what mercy, grace, and love look like. That's what repentance looks like—seeing in a new way how everyone fits into God's kingdom. Then within the community, there can be healing, reconciliation, restoration, and change—change for the individual, but maybe also change in the circumstances by which they became lost, so that they, and others, won't be lost again.

God is the shepherd going after the lost sheep; God is the woman lighting a lamp and sweeping the house for the lost coin. But today, which our denomination designates as “God's Work, Our Hands” day, we remember that *we* are called to actions that reflect God's light and love to the world. *We* are charged with seeking and welcoming the lost, which is not the end but only the beginning of the transformation of repentance that God is working *in all of us*. May heaven rejoice as we welcome each other back to the home which is owned, after all, not by us, but by God.