

(Psalms 51:10-12 NRSV)

<sup>10</sup> Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. <sup>11</sup> Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

(Luke 15:1-10 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." <sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <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 that was lost.' <sup>7</sup> Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

<sup>8</sup> "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' <sup>10</sup> Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

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## Who Counts?

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: September 13, 1998

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Text: Luke 15:1-10.

Yesterday morning I was at Allen Happe's memorial service. Now, the first thing you should know is that I knew for a couple of weeks that I would be at Allen's service yesterday. I don't want you to think I thought about this sermon only yesterday morning. In any case, I was Allen Happe's memorial service yesterday, and it was an inspiring and wonderful time of worship. Allen was the minister of our sister congregation, First Church, Congregational in Harvard Square. This spring he was diagnosed with inoperable brain tumors and knew that he had only a short time to live after the diagnosis. Indeed, the time turned out to be preciously short.

Allen was the beloved pastor of First Church and had been there for over twenty years. The service bore the marks of his long and beloved ministry. Allen himself had designed much of it. He chose the text for the preacher, and even gave him some instruction on how he wanted it preached. He called for music and liturgical dance, because he loved the sacred arts. And he hoped his closest friends would be there to celebrate not only his life but the reality of the resurrection.

And so, even more than the content itself, the people there made the service magnificent and a statement of how much regard Allen enjoyed. The large sanctuary was filled front to back with family, friends and parishioners. A whole section of the church was of clergy colleagues, ministers of every denomination, and even a Roman Catholic Cardinal, all robed and giving thanks, celebrating their friend's ministry. I'm glad to have been a part of it.

Allen Happe was well regarded and it showed.

Now I want to take you to another place, about 120 miles from here. It's to a hospital bed. In it lies a dying man out of his pain and his mind on morphine. He, too, was found to have inoperable cancer just a short time ago. Indeed, he will not live as long as Allen did after his diagnosis. This man is an alcoholic. Given his disease and lifestyle, he wasn't even aware he was any sicker than normal until he could hardly move. He once had a wife, who divorced him, and a son who disowned him. There are few who care about his plight – a couple of drinking buddies, maybe a sibling or two, and saying that they care may be to ascribe too strong a sentiment.

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His funeral will be a very different one from Allen's. A handful will pay their respects, as they say. There will be a few memories shared among them, I expect. But mostly there will be silence, silence for there will be precious little to say about this loss, precious little to celebrate about this life, precious little evidence of hope. There may be a dull ache there; it will be will result from the fact that a funeral inescapably brings up the reality of our common fate of death, and the potential meaninglessness of our lives.

The difference in these two memorial services are exact reflections of the difference between these two men. Allen was a public figure. He was well loved. He loved and helped others. He was responsible. He was caring. He was likeable. He affected a great many lives in a positive way. This other man is known only to a few and loved by far fewer. He was never very good at loving anyone. He was irresponsible, sometimes sadly uncaring and very often surly. What affect he had on people's lives was little, and most of it negative. His life will pass with hardly a notice or a tear.

This is the economy in which we live, that a fine and faithful minister's life is regarded far more highly than that of an alcoholic who has accomplished nothing. There is a certain get what you deserve idea that we have, and we try to live by it. This is the economy in which we live, the values system to which we ascribe, and I have little quibble with it.

Nonetheless, I'm not sure that this is God's value system.

"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

"Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?"

Both of these rhetorical questions seem to demand the answer, Why no one would fail to do it. They seem to demand the answer that any shepherd would look for the one lost sheep and leave the other ninety-nine behind, or any woman would sweep the whole house for one lost coin.

But is that really the answer we would give? I'm not sure I want you as the shepherd of my flock if you run off and leave ninety-nine behind in search of one stray. Can you imagine the havoc it could wreak? You go off to find the one who has gone astray, find it in the bushes and bring it back. That takes an hour or so. You come back, and now how many of the ninety-nine are left? Even with good luck, there are probably several others now lost. So instead of having just one to rescue, you have five, and the day is likely to go downhill from there if you don't stop running after lost sheep. Maybe a better message to the shepherd is that ninety-nine in the fold is better than one in the bush. You have to expect some losses, and don't make them worse by doing something foolish.

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The coin issue is a little less certain. Maybe if the coin is very valuable, and there isn't risk in losing the other coins, any householder would look diligently for the one that is lost. But what if it's but a dime, a ten cent piece? Would we light a lamp and look until we found it? We would run the risk of using far more than ten cents on flashlight batteries. And what about the value of our time. How much time does it make sense to spend looking for a mere ten cents?

So, I'm not sure that it is patently obvious that a good shepherd would risk the ninety-nine to save the one. Nor is it certain that everyone would light a lamp and sweep a whole house looking for a coin. It's not good shepherding economy. It's not good household economics. But it is God's economy. God cares about one who has gone astray and one who is lost, and will seek them out no matter what.

So, why the difference between our economy and God's? And, more important, what can we learn from God's?

First, our economy, the way we generally calculate things, is a zero sum game. That means there's only so much to go around. We cannot attend extravagant two hour memorial services for everyone who dies. We would do little else, if we did. So we must make choices. What we give here means we cannot give there. What we do here means we cannot do there. Quite understandably, we make choices that reflect our values and our relationships. And a lot more people are going to have had meaningful relationships, which they wish give thanks for, with Allen Happe than with the alcoholic who knew few and was valued by fewer.

But God's economy is not a zero sum game. And so, God can look after the one lost sheep without losing sight of the other ninety-nine. God can love and attend to the dying alcoholic without loving and attending to Allen less.

We cannot attain God's reach, to be sure. But we can, nonetheless, learn something from God's economy. For sometimes we see things as so scarce and limited that we limit ourselves more than we need to, our zero sum calculation may lead us to greed or envy or vengeance. The parable which immediately follows these two of the lost sheep and the lost coin is the parable of the prodigal son. In that story the younger son returns home from debauchery and the father holds a magnificent feast for him. The older brother, who has stayed home faithfully, becomes furious, furious not because he lost anything, not because he had to give up anything. In fact, the father reminds the older son that everything of the household is his. The older brother is furious because he doesn't think his younger brother deserves his father's love. But there he is wrong. There the point of all three parables comes home to resounding effect. God is not about vengeance. Nor is God's love only for the deserving. This of God's economy we can surely learn.

In the two parables we did read this morning it is worth noting that the things which are lost are of exactly the same value as the others. The one sheep and the one coin, which were lost, were not different from those which were not lost. The

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coins were all silver coins. The one lost sheep wasn't a runt, wasn't of a different color, and wasn't a troublemaker. It doesn't say one bad sheep left the flock. It was just a lost sheep, just like the ones which weren't lost.

Here, again, we can learn from God's economy. We may not have time to value everything and everyone the same. We will ever have to make distinctions about whose funeral we will go to and whose we won't, about to whom we can give our time and to whom we cannot. But we should never forget that these decisions and distinctions do not alter the fundamental fact: In God's eyes, in God's economy, in God's value system all the sheep, all the coins, all the people are equal. Should we not always recognize how the distinctions we make are, in the end, but relative, but a convenience, and they are often wrong, too, while God's valuing all equally is the essential and only truth. When we are too caught up in our distinctions, it is worth remembering that God's system is the final word on this.

At the end of the day I suspect we will find ourselves grateful for this love of God which reaches equally to the full range of creation, which loves fully the lost and the found sheep. I think we all be grateful first because we are all lost to some degree, and therefore, may be happy not to be left out of God's economy. That may very well be true and a very good reason to be thankful. But I am thinking of another reason, even more certain, to be thankful for the expansive love of God.

Yesterday morning many of us gathered to give thanks and to celebrate the life and ministry of Allen Happe. I'm glad to have been there. It was a wonderful service of worship and recognition of a fine man, minister and friend. I will miss him, as will many, many others. I loved Allen. In the choices I have to make, attending his service is one I was glad to make. When the alcoholic dies 120 miles from here, I'm not sure I'll be at his funeral. And even if I am, I will be one of a very few.

But the truth of the matter is this. Our human love, our human valuing, our human acknowledgment, our human distinctions are short-lived, ephemeral. Ten years from now, some at First Church and Allen's family will remember. Fifty years from now, a tiny number will. In a hundred years, if that, his presence will be but a metal plate on a memorial gift and an entry in the historical record. And, of course, his fate is ours. From the human economy, soon enough, he and we will all but have disappeared, no matter how regarded we have been in our time on the stage. But God's economy is different. There we will be beloved forever. There we will be valued always. There impermanence will be replaced by an eternity of God's abundance. And that will be true for Allen Happe, for the dying alcoholic, and it will be true for you and me. For in the end, in God's economy, who counts is every single one of us, every single one of us now and forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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