

**Message: “They Were Grumbling”<sup>1</sup>**

**One summer, when I was in middle school, my dad took us camping at Amistad Lake in South Texas.** Actually, middle school was called junior high in my day - that’s how old I am. Anyway, the trip felt special. We had a great time.

**It was also one of those summers when the cicadas were out.** Some cicadas are known as seventeen-year locusts. We got to the campground and rolled down the window only to hear a roar that sounded like the thunder of a massive waterfall or a jet engine before take-off. It was the cicadas, singing the song they remembered after seventeen years. We got used to it; it becomes white noise you no longer notice.

**What we didn’t get used to was the short life span of the creatures and how they would drop from the trees when their songs were done.** It was like a slow rainfall on the canvas roof of our tent, thumping like an irregular heartbeat as we tried to sleep. We also had to keep watch during mealtime, otherwise you might end up with some added protein on your plate or in your bowl.

**The upside to this insect precipitation was the bass were ready to jump at anything tossed into the lake.** We caught more fish that week than we had ever done so before or since. We had to keep watch on the limits to make sure we weren’t going over the line. The fish were just begging to be found.

**Jesus was hearing the white noise of complaint buzzing over him for some time now.** “He’s seen in the company of the wrong people!” “He’s just way too friendly with those folks.” Buzz, buzz, buzz. Dropping hints from behind hands and raised eyebrows like dead bugs from trees.

**So, Jesus tells a story. A couple of stories.** Well, three, but we’ll leave the last one for another time. He gathers the crowd and the eavesdroppers to whom he is really talking. Jesus says, “*Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, leaves them . . .*” (Luke 15:4).

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<sup>1</sup> Material drawn from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/having-words-with-jesus/fourteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c-lectionary-planning-notes/fourteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-c-preaching-notes>

**We aren't told who's in the crowd.** There probably weren't any farmers or shepherds. But everyone knows what the right answer is. None of us! Let's talk about acceptable losses. Let's discuss depreciation. Jesus, you may know woodworking and messiah-ing, but you're not a rancher. It would be crazy: leaving ninety-nine sheep unprotected to go off looking for one wanderer.

**Just crazy. And let's talk about this woman and her lost coin.** She sweeps the house - good idea - and when she finds the coin, she throws a party for all her friends and neighbors.

**What? The party's going to cost more than the coin was worth.** She'd come out ahead just holding on to the nine coins. Oh, sure, we can convince ourselves this isn't just a coin, but a dowry, or a special headdress somehow signaling her worth to the whole world. Going around without it would have been like smiling with a missing tooth. That may be true, but it isn't really clear in the text. The word is *drachma*, a significant coin, to be sure. It may represent a tenth of her life savings or even her whole family's life savings or generations of family, perhaps. But still, it seems excessive, this party-throwing response to the finding. The coin rolled off the table into a hidden crevice, or the sheep followed its nose into a gully or the edge of the wilderness.

**What makes them worth all the effort?** That's the question Jesus is posing to the crowd. Actually, he's mostly speaking to the eavesdroppers who are complaining about his priorities. Buzz, buzz.

**Okay so let's talk about priorities.** There's a lot of effort involved in the seeking. The shepherd risks life and limb to find the wandering sheep, putting at risk the ninety-nine who know better. The woman lights a light and sweeps the whole house, puts in overtime, extra effort to find the coin. And let's be honest: neither the coin nor the sheep expressed any desire to be found. We're happy to fish when the fish practically are jumping into the boat, taking the measly bait we offer with little effort on our part. We're good with that. We like the lost who find their own way back. In fact, a lot of our outreach efforts are based on this premise. People will find their own way back, or at least they'll ask to be found.

**Jesus seems to be suggesting a different approach, or a different understanding, or maybe a different relationship.** I think that's it: a different relationship. Jesus sends us seeking. That's why these stories are hard words. We're given work to do, effort to extend; and we're given an attitude in which we expend this energy. We're seeking with joy. We're seeking something precious, something essential. And then when we find those we are seeking, we celebrate. We don't condemn and judge and point fingers and put them in time out until they measure up to our own personal standards. "*We rejoice,*" Jesus says (Luke 15:6,9).

**We didn't read the text, but it isn't until the third story that the ninety-nine sheep left behind and the nine coins still sitting in their proper place get to speak.** It's in the voice of the older brother, who complains, who pouts, who declares this found one isn't worth the party we're throwing here. It doesn't reflect well on the eavesdroppers, on the righteous ones who don't need a search party, who don't step out of line. And then the shepherd who seeks and the woman who sweeps, and the father who searches the horizon every single day says, "*You are always with me and everything I have is yours*" (Luke 15:31).

**Why should we throw a party for the found ones?** Because we live in a party every single day. Because celebration is our *modus operandi*, our regular habit. We are the party people! We are Easter people! We are people who celebrate what God has done. So, of course, we throw a party. Otherwise, all our mumbling is white noise, buzzing away in the background, fit to be ignored. "*Rejoice with me,*" says the seeker, "*for the lost have been found*" (Luke 15:7,9,24).

Let us pray:

*God calls to the lost, the least, and all who long for home;  
God calls when we wander from the path chosen for us and waste the gifts we've been given. God calls and welcomes us back to worship this day. Let's celebrate and rejoice in God's presence forever. Let's worship God together. Most of all, let's never stop seeking those who are lost, waiting to be found. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

**Luke 15:1-10 (CEB)**

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.”

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