

God's party time: Luke 15:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

by [Mary Schertz](#) in the [September 4, 2007](#) issue

I can never read stories about Jesus and his closest conversation partners, the Pharisees, without remembering JOY with some bemusement. JOY was the junior girls' group in the small mission church in which I grew up, and it stood for "Jesus first, Others second, Yourself last." It is perhaps no accident that this tiny social group spawned a number of staunch feminists, but that's another story.

One of my memories of JOY was the tension between the "church girls" and the "town girls." We church girls struggled mightily to be less smug and more open-hearted, but it was hard work. Despite the ample rewards for letting go of a carefully cultivated sense of superiority, such as the all-out fun and whoop-it-up trouble we enjoyed together, we church girls often settled for less grace and more superiority.

My memories are doubly ironic since I now know that two generations earlier, members of my own family were the impoverished folks welcomed by the people in that particular church. My grandmother's often repeated refrain was, "Where would this family be without the Chicago Home Mission?" I am grateful for knowing about this connection now—and forever grateful to both my grandmother and the town girls for knocking off some of the smugness.

In Luke 15:1-10, Jesus and those around him are fully engaged in this struggle to let go of notions of superiority and join the human party. The stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, along with the one about the lost son which follows, constitute Luke's "party chapter." It begins with Luke's commentary on the social tension that is developing in this part of Jesus' ministry. Jesus has already attracted the religious folks, the Pharisees and the scholars, but now tax collectors and sinners (the town girls of Luke's account) are coming in numbers that are disconcerting to the traditional religious folks, who begin to murmur among themselves (never a positive sign in Luke-Acts). They talk about the riffraff who are hanging around Jesus, and the fact that Jesus is not sufficiently aware of the difference in status between the various groups of his hangers-on.

As Luke sets it up, Jesus tells the three stories in direct response to this murmuring. The texts for this Sunday—about the lost sheep and the lost coin—are stories to which most of us can relate. Whether the two situations are totally realistic is not the point; the point is that whether or not we would actually leave 99 sheep to go look for one, or turn a house upside down in search of a single coin, all of us have experienced a crisis that abruptly turns our attention from the macrocosm to the microcosm. When such a crisis occurs, a normal human reaction is to shift focus, marshal all resources and apply every effort to solving the problem.

We leave 99 sheep to fend for themselves. We leave nine coins to gather dust. Whether it makes sense or not, whether it is for the common good or not, we abandon our sense of the whole. We abandon our perspective on the big picture in order to give our intelligence and passion to the crisis at hand. The universality of such experience and response is underscored by the questions with which Jesus begins each of his illustrations: What man of you . . . ? What woman of you . . . ? Would not any human being act in much the same way, Jesus asks. Both searches are successful. The shepherd finds his lost sheep; the housewife finds her lost coin.

The surprise component of these parables is neither the loss itself nor the diligent search. Thus far, both actors are behaving in normal, everyday ways in this universal human experience of the crisis of loss. But the next action they take is by no means ordinary. Normal actions involve relief, repentance and remediation. We castigate ourselves for our stupidity. We vow relentlessly that we will never allow *that* to happen again. We may share our joy with the immediate family, but rarely would we throw a party for the neighbors—partly, no doubt, because we hate to admit the reasons for the crisis in the first place. No, most of our energy goes into taking whatever steps are necessary to shore up the security of the enterprise. We are just glad that the worst has not happened this time and that we can move on with our lives.

The shepherd and the housewife, however, behave differently. With abandon they gather friends and neighbors and invite them to help celebrate the successful searches. Does the shepherd serve roast mutton to his guests? Does the housewife spend her nine coins on refreshments? The mood is extravagant, abundant and generous. The occasion is unambiguously designated as party time!

The lostness of the human community is just such a crisis for God, Jesus is saying. God's passion is bent toward the service of the lost; God's mercy is reckless and profligate. It is a prodigal passion, and our visions of salvation are measly by

comparison. God's party time is by no means limited to the salvation of souls—it is the whole person, body and soul, who goes partying. Nor is God's party time limited to a certain class of people. From Luke's perspective, the interesting question is who the lost are. Are they the tax collectors, the sinners, the town girls? Or are they the Pharisees, scholars and church girls? As 1 Timothy 2 puts it, "The grace of our Lord overflowed." In the end, all are invited to the party; check your superiority at the door and join the dance.