

“Parables of Grace”

Luke 15:1-10

On the front page of last Monday’s Plain Dealer was an article entitled, “Unemployed not only ones affected by joblessness – family and friends sacrifice to help out.”

It was a long article from which I share with you a few excerpts:

Persistent unemployment has become a seam in the fabric of society.

On this Labor Day, joblessness links pieces of the country from top to bottom like never before, experts say. So many people have been unemployed for so long that nearly everyone knows someone in that predicament.

Indeed, nearly three-quarters of Americans have either lost a job in this recession or have a close friend or family member who has, according to a survey released last week by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

These are people who take in laid-off friends. Children helping their unemployed parents pay bills. Relatives comforting family during the emotional toll of unemployment.

They are people like Loretta Cross, who helped friend Linda Blunk of Parma Heights.

Blunk believed she would soon find another job after she was laid off from a clerical position in the financial services industry more than two years ago. Prospective employers often remarked that she was “very qualified, “but they didn’t hire her.

Blunk, now 61, suspects they were reluctant to hire someone her age.

With no job and no unemployment check, she and her husband couldn’t pay a \$700-plus mortgage, \$500 in monthly medical expenses and still afford groceries on his \$1,300 Social Security check.

One day, Blunk waited for her friend, Cross, to leave work. Then she left a message on her voicemail because she was too embarrassed to face her with this request.

“Loretta, it’s Linda,” she said, crying hysterically. “We are very, very low on staples, and we don’t have any money to buy anything. Please give me a call tomorrow.”

The next day, Cross arrived at the Blunks’ home with three big boxes of supplies.

“We call her our angel,” Blunk said.

Cross has much in common with Americans in the Rutgers study. The survey found that people feel deep concern about the plight of the unemployed, fear about their own job security and worry about the country’s economic future.

Loretta Cross, the woman who helped the Blunks, is the lay visitation minister at their church, Divinity Lutheran Church in Parma Heights.

Cross said as unemployment remains high, the church’s ministry has expanded to meet the needs of the jobless. (Ohio’s unemployment rate in July was 10.3 percent. The U.S. rate was 9.5 percent.)

She said many, like the Blunks, are embarrassed to ask for help. They were the ones who used to give to the food pantry. Now they must accept donations from it.

Just a few years ago, Linda Blunk, the unemployed clerical worker from Parma Heights, said she never would have imagined herself unemployed and having to rely on others to make it.

“I used to look down on people who went for help,” she said. “I used to think: ‘You look perfectly healthy. Why don’t you go get a job?’

“Going through it, we know now.”

The entire article is hanging on the bulletin board in the narthex if you'd like to read it.

There are a whole lot of lost sheep out there, some of us more lost than others. How far are we willing to go in our following Jesus into the wilderness to seek out and stand by the lost person in our family, in our church, in our community? What would Jesus do?

When Luke introduces the parable of the lost sheep, he records that tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him, and that the Pharisees and scribes (the winners) grumbled extensively about such consorting with losers. "This man welcomes sinners," they grumble, "and even eats with them." And Luke completes his introduction in verse 3 by saying, "So Jesus told them a parable."

In other words, the parable is presented as yet another instance of Jesus' rubbing the salt of lostness on the sensibilities of those of us who are preoccupied with the sweetness of our own success. If our business is successful, who cares about who is being hurt? If our team is winning, who cares about the one not playing or one moving to South Beach?

As far as the parable itself is concerned, Matthew and Luke give only slightly different versions. Jesus begins by proposing to his audience, the Pharisees and scribes, a hypothetical case. Suppose, he suggests to them, a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost. Jesus then asks, expecting of course an affirmative answer, "Won't the man leave the 99 in the wilderness and go seek the lost?"

Time for a pause. While it may or may not be true that shepherds in Jesus' day had that kind of devotion to individual members of their flocks, this parable can hardly be interpreted as a helpful hint for running a successful sheep ranching business. The most likely result of going off in pursuit of one lost sheep will only be 99 more lost sheep. Jesus is implying, it seems to

me, that even if all 100 sheep should get lost, it would not be a problem for this bizarrely Good Shepherd because he is first and foremost in the business of finding the lost. Give him a world with 100 out of every 100 souls lost – give him, in other words, the world full of sinners that is the only real world we have – and it will do just fine: lostness is exactly his cup of tea.

No matter what we do with lostness, though, the rest of the parable is about one thing and one thing only: joy (chara in Greek), which is the root and blossom of the shepherd's will to find. Jesus paints a vivid picture of joy, complete with the man putting the sheep on his shoulders, coming back to his house, calling together his friends and neighbors, and saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep."

It is the very end of the parable, however, that Jesus makes his point most strongly. Pushing his comparison all the way to heaven itself he says, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance."

Then Jesus tells the parable of the lost coin. Jesus begins in the same hypothetical way ("what woman, if she had 10 silver coins . . .") and he continues with the same suggestion that she will drop everything and hunt energetically for the lost property. When she finds it, Jesus says, she too calls friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin I lost." Finally, Jesus concludes the parable with the same observation as before: "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Consider this. A lost sheep is for all practical purposes a dead sheep. A lost coin is likewise a dead asset. Looking ahead to the parables of the unforgiving servant and the prodigal son, a person in debt about to be foreclosed on is a dead duck and a son who has blown his inheritance is a deadbeat. All these parables of lostness are not stories designed to convince us

that if we will wind ourselves up or climb up the ladder to some better level of moral or spiritual improvement, then God will forgive us. No!

Rather these are parables about God's determination to move before we do – in short, to make lostness and death the only tickets we need to the Supper of the Lamb. In all of these parables, it is precisely the lost (and thus the dead) who come to the party. More than that, in none of these parables is anything except the will of God portrayed as necessary to the new life in joy. The sheep, the coin, the debtor, the son do nothing to earn the new life in joy. God alone gives life and he gives it freely and fully on no conditions whatsoever. These stories, therefore, are parables of grace and grace only. There is in them not one single note of earning or merit, not one breath about rewarding the rewardable. There is only the gracious, saving determination of the shepherd, the woman, the king, and the father – all surrogates for God – to raise the dead.

That, I think, puts repentance, confession and absolution in a different light. Confession, for example, turns out to be something different than we thought. It is not the admission of a mistake which, thank God and our better nature, we have finally recognized and corrected. Rather it is the admission that we are dead in our sins – that we have no power of ourselves either to save ourselves or to convince anyone else that we are worth saving.

Confession is the recognition that our whole life is finally and forever out of our hands and that if we ever live again, our life will be entirely the gift of some gracious other.

And to take the other side of the coin, absolution too becomes another matter. It is neither a response to a worthy confession, nor the acceptance of an apology. “Absolvere” in Latin means to dispose of, to complete, to finish. When God pardons, therefore, he does not say

he understands our weakness or makes allowances for our errors; rather he disposes of, he finishes with, the whole of our dead life and raises us up with a new one. He does not so much deal with our sins as he does drop them down the back hole of Jesus' death. He forgets our sins in the darkness of the tomb. He remembers our iniquities no more. He finds us in the desert of death and in the power of Jesus' resurrection, he puts us on his shoulders rejoicing and brings us home. That is Amazing Grace.