

Love Through a Wide Angle Lens
Picking Up Pennies
Luke 15:1-10

Poem

LET THE ARTISTS WIN, by Bob Janis-Dillon

I vote we let the artists win
the ones covered in paint from their last attempt
to smuggle across the beauty of a bowl of fruit
the 14-year-old rapper learning to spit
throwing life's chaos on the rhythm wheel
uncovering the shapes that live on after the next break

I say we let the food bank volunteers win
the ones always carrying around their agenda
for the meeting, waging campaigns
to stock shelves with bread

I would like to see the nurses extend their string of victories
from the hospital bed to the nation's boardrooms
until we care for each other as if death
were inevitable and mercy was the only thing
that made the rounds bearable

I say we let the kindergarten teachers win
as they raise up small edifices
for the beauty words
will never capture or reveal

Maybe even let the helpless drunkard win sometimes,
when she cries into her beer
and declares it's all too much

I will let the grandmothers win
when they tell the old stories
that hold me in their keeping

And the children yelling
play! play! The ones who have already cost us so much
of our final productivity
the only tyrants who can command
the true attention of the wise

I want them to win too
again and again
without pity

and then when the men with guns come
we can say I'm sorry
but whether you win or lose
it's really never been my game sir
I have lost
and lost again a thousand wars of the heart
and those to whom I have waved the white flag
those to whom
I have surrendered
the whole and holy of my life
will never
never
let me go

Sermon

A handful of years ago, the Associated Press did a survey of pet owners. Here's what they asked: What's the most you would be willing to spend on medical care for your pet? These numbers are a little bit old now, so factor some inflation into what you hear, but this is what more than a thousand people from all around the country said.

Most of the pet owners (62%) said they would be happy to pay for a medical procedure that cost \$500. Half said they'd spend up to \$1,000. About a third said they'd likely agree to a \$2,000 vet bill. And about 22% said they'd readily commit to \$5,000 in veterinary costs to treat their sick dog or cat.

The survey also suggested that cat owners were likely to quit on a pet sooner than dog owners—but only for expenses under \$500. Beyond \$500, there was no difference between dog and cat owners; they are equally committed to whatever it takes to save their animal friends. Also, income level didn't have much influence on people's feelings about their veterinary spending limits. Pet owners who earned less than \$50,000 a year answered about the same as people who earned more than that.

As I read about that survey online, what I found most interesting was the comments in response. They were all over the map. Some of the people who responded had spent \$30,000, or more, to extend the life of their sick dog. Others said some version of "Are you kidding me?"

Thirty thousand dollars sounds to me like a lot of money to spend on a pet, but I don't have an animal who feels like my full-time companion. And I live in a time and a place where it's not hard to imagine someone making that decision. That number might sound a lot different to someone for whom \$30,000 is the down payment on a house, or a year's wages, or the difference between sending a child to college or not. We wouldn't judge someone in that situation for making a different decision.

In the law there's something called the 'reasonable man' standard. When a jury or judge has to decide what is negligent conduct, they ask, "Would a reasonable person have acted that way in the same situation?" The slang version of that question is something like, 'Who would have acted this way? And who wouldn't?'"

But the reasonable person standard doesn't fit every situation. Who wouldn't spend \$30,000 to replace all four knees on the cat you love? I don't know. Who would?

Jesus starts both stories that we just heard from the Gospel of Luke with a 'reasonable person' question. 'Who wouldn't do that?'

Suppose a shepherd had a hundred sheep and lost one of them. What shepherd wouldn't leave the other ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? Throw that dirty, heavy sheep over his shoulders and carry it all the way home?

Well, probably *every* shepherd. No one would ever do that. If you left 99 sheep alone, you'd be risking more than you lost. They'd probably roam off, or get stolen, or eaten by a wolf. If you lose 1% of your investment, you don't risk losing the remaining 99% to get it back.

No one would leave those 99 sheep. It's just not smart. It's not reasonable.

Or what woman who has ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, doesn't light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And then when she's found it, call all her friends and neighbors and say, 'Come and celebrate with me, because I've found the coin I lost.'

No one does that either. You wouldn't risk using up your small and precious supply of oil and spend all day cleaning to look for one small coin. You don't call friends and neighbors together for a celebration so you can spend more money feeding and entertaining them than the thing you found was worth. Why bother looking for the coin at all, if you're just going to spend that money, and more, on a party?

Don't ever hire Jesus to manage your money.

You've heard these stories before, I'm sure. What you might not have noticed is that when Jesus told those stories, he was talking to people who would not have thought of themselves as lost sheep or lost coins...or even the lost son in the prodigal son story that follows these two. When he was telling these stories, Jesus was talking to the best and most religious people in Israel. Everyone else—all the people who might have felt lost—were just overhearing Jesus. Pharisees and scribes have gotten a lot of bad press in the last two thousand years, but actually, Pharisees and scribes in Jesus' day were deeply religious people. They tried very hard to obey God, with all the spiritual practices they knew. They were the 99 sheep who were doing just what they were supposed to do, following the laws, holding the herd (maybe the church) together. This story makes it sound like Jesus would have left them to fend for themselves.

Who wouldn't have risked everything to go search for those lost things? Everyone. Every reasonable person. Jesus' point is not about reasonable behavior. Maybe it's about something else.

Hold that thought for a minute.

I want to tell you a story about my dad.

My father picks up every coin he sees on the sidewalk. It doesn't matter whether it's a quarter or a nickel or a penny. It doesn't matter how fast he's trying to get somewhere. He can always be distracted by free money on the street. In the days when there were pay phones around, my dad would dart into every one of them and check the change cup to see if the last caller had left something behind. One time he stopped several lanes of traffic in front of an airport because he saw something glinting in the sun on the asphalt, and he thought it might be a diamond. (It was.)

I, on the other hand, am much more reasonable about what I'll stop to pick up. A quarter, for sure. I like dimes. A penny? Hardly ever. Often I don't even take the pennies from the metal bowl under that roller coaster for change that they have at the grocery store. I just leave them there. My father thinks I am a spendthrift.

Most countries in the world with complex economic systems and high standards of living like the U.S. have already stopped minting pennies. Someone calculated that if you make anything over \$22 an hour, if you take three seconds to stop and pick up a penny, you're losing money, not gaining it. There's almost nothing that looks more lifeless and dirty and valueless than a dull copper coin that has been walked on and driven over and scratched up until it is barely recognizable. By any economic, utility, efficiency, aesthetic, even hygienic standard, pennies are not worth our time or attention.

In this world, some people are like pennies. They get lost—all the time. They're hardly worth picking up, much less going out and searching for them. It's hard to justify the investment of public resources, or the extension of *another* chance. Often they're people who are impossible for us to identify with or talk sense into. People whose decisions demonstrate an abundance of bad judgment. They have very little reasonable prospect of productivity or turn-around.

Who *wouldn't* stop a full day's work, put their assets at risk, use up their time and energy and credit to go look for every one of those walking one-cent-ers?

Everyone wouldn't do it. Only God would do that.

Those two stories Jesus told aren't about us. They're not about a reasonable person. They're about God.

Jesus said one more thing just to underline his point. 'You know what really makes God happy?' he said; 'One lost person, one person that everyone else has already given up on, changing, becoming a whole person, finding a whole new life. It's even better than ninety-nine righteous people being good all the time.' And then he said it again. 'Joy breaks out among God's

angels—they get all giggly—every time one completely hopeless person changes their heart, their life.’

Ahh...I see. What God likes is surprise endings. Change. *Un*-reasonable hope. The absurdly extravagant mercy that makes that kind of change possible.

Compassion Week, that begins a week from tomorrow, isn’t really about *our* compassion. Our compassion is, most of the time, pretty limited. It’s limited by our energy, our time, our mostly unconscious calculations about what’s reasonable. Sometimes it’s limited by the ceiling on our hope. At its best, Compassion Week is our effort to faintly resemble God’s wide, altogether-unreasonable compassion. To experiment with a kind of unconditional generosity that we can barely understand. To practice listening to stories without asking ourselves whether we would have done the same thing. To risk spending time and effort on someone who offers no reasonable hope of redemption, someone who’s likely to resist kindness and growl back at a smile and mutter ‘I can do it myself.’ To go out of our way to bend down and pick up every grimy, misshapen penny we see. To remember that’s how *we* got found.

This morning—all day, actually—the members of New Covenant Choir are collecting coins, as they do every year as we approach Compassion Week. ‘Change for Change’ they call it. From the change that mostly weighs down your pockets or your purse—money that you probably won’t miss at all if it’s gone—you’re being invited to give today to help fund the work of our sister church in Salinas that offers, every day, a place and a full set of services for people who are unhoused, people who have no home. For this collection, every coin—every penny—has value.

There’s a penny attached to your bulletin this morning. You could take it and put it in the Change for Change container as you walk out of this sanctuary. You could put it in the offering plate. If you do, it will be added to the Change for Change collection. But maybe you’ll want to keep this penny for a while. Carry it with you. Let it remind you to stop, and even to walk a little bit out of your way. To bend down and pick up another life that, until you do, might have been treated like it had no more value than a penny that has been lying on the street or next to a cash register, unnoticed, for way too long.

Let’s go out in the world and be unreasonably, disorderly, even recklessly compassionate people. Let’s give God a reason to have a party.