

*Servants In the Ditch*  
A Sermon on Luke 15:1-10 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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*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?*

Our attention is most often focused on our actions, our feelings, our abilities, and our responsibilities. Sometimes we assume that we are the ones who are responsible for getting the job done. If a coin or a sheep goes missing, we are the ones responsible for conducting the search. We forget that we are part of God's big, beautiful creation. We are blinded when it comes to seeing the way God is working in the world. We forget that God is the one who is searching for us.

God is seeking after us. This is the message of the first book written in the English language by a woman. Long ago and far away there was a woman who lived in the city of Norwich, in England. Her name was Julian. She was born in the year 1343.

We know that Julian must have been a fairly wealthy person, because she could read and write, and very few people learned to read and write in 14th century England. When she was thirty years old, Julian became seriously ill. She may have contracted one of the deadly plagues that was sweeping through England at the time. Julian's condition grew worse and last rites were administered on the fourth night of her illness.

During the very worst part of her illness, Julian had sixteen visions of Jesus. We know all of this happened because several days later Julian made a full recovery from her illness. Julian spent much of the rest of her life creating a written account of her visions and their meaning, eighty-six chapters in all. The book was eventually given the title *The Revelations of Divine Love*.

Permit me to read a short section of Julian's book, from chapter fifty-one. In this section of the book, Julian is describing her thirteenth vision, a vision of a powerful lord of an estate, and his servant. *I saw two persons in bodily form...a lord and a servant. The lord sits solemnly in repose and in peace. The servant stands near...ready to do his lord's will. The lord looks upon his servant most lovingly and sweetly, and humbly he sends the servant to a certain place to do his will.*

*The servant not only goes, but he leaps up and runs in great haste because of his love to do his lord's will. And he soon falls into a deep pit and receives very great injury...In his pain, the greatest misfortune that I saw him in was the lack of reassurance he experienced, for he could not turn his face to look back upon his loving lord, who was in fact very near to him and in whom there is complete reassurance.*

*In his woe, the servant endured seven great pains. The first was the painful bruising he received from his fall. The second was the sluggishness of his body. The third was his weakness. The fourth was that he was deluded in his reasoning and so stunned in his mind that he had almost forgotten his own love to do his master's will. The fifth was that he could not rise up. The sixth was that he lay all alone. The seventh was that the pit where he was lying was deep, hard and painful.*

*I wondered how this servant could humbly endure all of this pain. And I watched to see if I could discover any failure in the servant, or if his master would blame him for falling this way. And I could see no blame in him, for only his good will and his great desire to serve his master were the cause of his falling...And in the same way his loving lord constantly watched him with great tenderness...Then says this gracious lord, "Behold my beloved servant. What harm and distress he has received in my service... and all because of his good will and desire to serve."*

This is a vision of the relationship between God and those who seek to serve God. Those who serve God make mistakes. We call these mistakes 'sins'. Many of our mistakes comes as the result of us trying to serve God. Yet we suffer grievous pain as a result of our mistakes.

God's concern is not to blame us for our mistakes. God knows that many of our mistakes are the result of us trying to serve. Like the servant who has fallen into the ditch in Julian's vision, God's primary concern is that God wants to see us. God's desire is not to punish, but to be in relationship with us.

I first read this vision of Julian of Norwich about twenty years ago, and it's been stuck in my mind ever since. This picture of the servant and the master, and the servant falling in the ditch has stayed with me for the past twenty years because this is what I see happening in the world. Especially as I spend more of my time in the company of Jesus' disciples, I hear and see stories every day that remind me of the story of the servant and the master.

I've been thinking about the thirteenth vision of Julian as I've been watching and talking with one of my friends. His story is the same variety as Julian's vision of the servant and the master. My friend has been trying to do the right thing for a long time, but the road has not been easy. Like the servant, there has been lots of pain and suffering. It seems like he often feels like he is the one responsible, and that he is more or less alone.

Like the servant, it seems like my friend has fallen into some sort of ditch. He made some mistakes, like the rest of us and like the servant in the story. But he made these mistakes out of his desire to do the right thing.

For my friend, I think the most difficult part of falling into the ditch, is that he can't see very much or very well, since he has fallen into a deep pit. His own reasoning is obstructed, and sometimes he misinterprets the things he can see. Worst of all, he cannot see God's loving gaze. He cannot see that God is looking at him with love. He cannot see that God is actually seeking after him.

We think we can see things clearly, but we are often more like the servant lying in the ditch. We do not see clearly. One of the things my friend does not see clearly is the gifts that God has given him. These gifts are so close to the center of who he is, he cannot see his strongest gifts.

My friend does not see the strongest gifts in himself. Like the servant in Julian's vision *he is deluded in his reasoning and so stunned in his mind that he has almost forgotten his own love to do his master's will.* But God sees the gifts in my friend. God is desperately seeking after my friend, because God loves my friend and sees the gifts he is carrying are precious.

Jesus told this parable, *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? 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.'*

This is a parable about God's love for us. God is the woman who has lost one of her precious coins. She will not give up the search until she finds it. What is so precious to God that she is searching for it so desperately? You are precious to God. God is seeking after you, like the woman who lost one of her precious coins. God will never give up on you.

For each of us, there are times when we have fallen into a ditch, like the servant in Julian's vision. Sometimes we are in that ditch for five or ten years or more. Like Julian says, that ditch is deep, and hard, and painful, and lonely. There are times in our lives when we cannot see that God is seeking after us, and that God loves us.

This is why we are here today. We are here to remember that our vision is not very good. We are here to remember that the blaming and feelings of guilt come from us, not from God.

We are here to remember that God sees us in our struggles. We are here to remember that God looks at us in love. We are here to remember that God is seeking after us.

