

Clean Sweep (Luke 15:1-10)

by Jennifer E. Copeland

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The best storytellers paint pictures with words, using words to fill our minds with vivid imagery. I remember reading the first Harry Potter novel to my first-grade son. Each time we completed a chapter and I turned the page to start a new one he would shift in my lap and look away from the book. Finally I asked him what was wrong. He replied, "I don't want to see the drawing on the first page of the chapter because I want to think about what things look like all by myself." Of course, with three Harry Potter movies released, everyone knows what Harry and Ron "look like." We've seen Hogwarts, Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley, and we've seen brooms -- Nimbus Two Thousands, Firebolt and others.

When Jesus told his stories about a lost sheep and a lost coin he left the details to our imagination. Like my six-year-old constructing scenes in his mind, we imagine those who will not give up until the lost are found, a shepherd with his staff in hand, a woman with her broom, From the earliest days, people were accustomed to thinking of a shepherd's staff as a symbol of divine protection. God brought the metaphor to life by calling a shepherd to lead the people out of Egypt and then again to serve as king, promising all the while, "I will not take my steadfast love from him" (2 Sam.7:15). It's not much of a leap, then, to think of Jesus holding a shepherd's staff, especially since many of us grew up with that picture framed on the wall in our Sunday school rooms.

A broom is a different matter. Nobody ever painted Jesus with a broom in his hand, even if the metaphor of sweeping is used several times by the prophets to refer to God. Luke, however, pairs these stories in such a way that a broom carries as much weight as a shepherd's staff for symbolizing God's care. The point of both stories, of course, is that God will seek us by any means available until we are found. In order for us to appreciate fully the depth of God's seeking, Jesus intends for us to identify personally with the search, for indeed God's love is as personal as it is universal. Imagine the men from the fields and the women from the houses leaving their tasks to edge toward the circle forming around Jesus and, naturally, bringing their staffs and brooms with them. Jesus, pondering how best to describe the depth of God's love, surveyed the crowd before him, fixed on the ordinary objects held in their hands, and told a pair of

stories about how we look for things that are lost.

If you've never been a shepherd, you might not understand the deep connection between the animal and its owner. And if you've never swept a floor, you might not understand the satisfaction of having every object in its place, neat and tidy and easily found. The people on the outer edges of the circle listening to Jesus spar with the Pharisees that day knew those feelings, even if the Pharisees didn't. How many of us today can muster a semblance of their elation over finding something? We can barely keep track of the items in our lives that aren't lost, accumulating so many things that we have to rent storage units to contain them all. And when was the last time you saw a shepherd's staff used for anything other than a prop in a children's pageant or a processional for a bishop? Why don't bishops carry brooms, I wonder? At least they're useful.

Earlier this summer I attended a celebration for a woman I know who has recently become the first female in her place of employment to join the highest levels of the organization. The celebration called for a symbol. We wanted a divine symbol because we are all Christians -- and the place where my friend works is a Christian organization -- but we wanted a distinctive symbol to commemorate her new position. So, we brought brooms. Some of us grabbed an old kitchen broom; some of us purchased a new one just for this occasion. Why a broom, you might ask? Why a culturally defined symbol of women's work when one among us had finally broken free of the stereotype? The answer lies in this story from Luke and our belief that God validates the work of sweeping every bit as much as the work of shepherding. In the sweeping, God searches, but also cleanses. I like to imagine God, broom in hand, patiently sweeping away the dirt from our lives and restoring us to our God-given image. In this way we are each uniquely found by God, since we each have our own unique ways of being lost.

The lost sheep and the lost coin are more than the prized possessions of their owners; they are also parts of a whole. The sheep belongs to the flock and the coin to the purse; without them the whole is not complete. The search, then, is a quest for restoration and wholeness. In this sense, all of us who are part of God's creation should be just as anxious as God until the lost are restored and we are made whole again by their presence. Then, with brooms in hand, we can answer God's call, "Rejoice with me."