

«This fellow welcomes sinners»

Psalm 14 and Luke 15:1-10

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Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So [Jesus] told them this parable: ⁴ “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? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ “Or what woman having ten silver coins,^[a] if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ 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.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Those of us here today who hold a U.S. passport – or those of us who were born in the U.S. – are probably well aware that today is the 15th anniversary of the terrorist attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people in New York City, Arlington, Virginia, and Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

There are teenagers in our church who were not yet born on that September morning in 2001, when 19 al-Qaeda hijackers steered four airplanes, including their passengers and flight crews, into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and a field in central Pennsylvania.

No one in my family was lost in the attacks, but a couple (a husband and a wife) from my church at the time (this was in Wheaton, Illinois) lost a son who was working for a financial firm in the Twin Towers. The parents were traveling in Asia at the time, and then for three days after the attacks – as you may remember – there were no flights in or out of the U.S.

They were making frantic phone calls, hoping against hope that their son was alive. Was he in his office that morning or not?

All these years later, more than a thousand people are still unaccounted for. In spite of the heroic work by medical examiners, more than a thousand people – think of this: more than 40 percent of those who died in the Twin Towers – left not a trace of DNA.

Often in the days and weeks following the attacks, family members would post ads on walls or place ads in newspapers. There would be a picture and the words: “Missing, if you have seen my wife [or my daddy], call 555-678-5047.”

It was heart-breaking. If we hadn’t lost someone, we could all feel the pain that they were experiencing.

Many families were unable to let go. To them, there just had to be some explanation. Instead of going to work that morning, maybe their loved one stopped for breakfast, maybe they skipped work that day to play a round of golf, something. They refused to lose hope that their loved one would come home.

Those signs and advertisements have mostly disappeared now, though every once in a while, another one will pop up. And when it does, it’s a testimony to something in the human spirit. In spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we believe that there is always a chance.

So, we should never give up hope.

You know, it’s easy for those of us who have never lost anyone without a trace – think of that Malaysian airliner a year and a half ago with 227 people aboard – think of that and then think of telling their families to just give up hope.

“Let it go,” we want to tell them. **“It’s over. Move on. Get on with your lives.”**

In my first year of ministry, I was a 23-year-old intern at a small church in Iowa – this was Iowa City, Iowa, for those of you who know the state - and one of the young men at our church – he was 44 at the time – had a heart attack, while hunting, and he died, a very sudden and unexpected death.

He left behind a young wife and three young children.

One afternoon, I was sitting in my office at the church. I had my feet up on my desk, day-dreaming about being a famous pastor, and then the telephone rang, and it was the secretary or administrative assistant to the man who had died.

This was a few months after his death, and his young son had come home from school and had dialed the number of his father’s office. And when the secretary answered the phone, the boy asked for his father, as though nothing had happened. Maybe it had all been a bad dream. Maybe this awful thing had never really happened.

So, on the chance that his father was still alive, still working at the same office, the son called because he wanted to speak with him.

And then, a very alert secretary called me a few moments later, and she said that I might want to go over and spend some time with that young man, which I did. The boy, as it turned out, was not crazy or out of his mind or losing touch with reality. He had a fierce hope within him that he would see his father again.

And to his credit, he was not about to give up.

I think about stories like that – and I know a few others – and I think about God and about God’s determination to find us, to seek us out, to search for us, to never give up.

It’s dangerous, of course, to project a lot of human characteristics onto God, but in this case I think we can learn something about God that we should know, that would be very helpful for us to know. We were created in the image and likeness of God, and one of the characteristics we have inherited, so to speak, is this thing, this spirit within us that will never let go.

If you have lost someone you love, then you never give up hope. You dream of the day that that person walks through the door and says, **“hello, I’m back, how have you been?”**

And that is one of the characteristics of God that most excites me, and that most comforts me ... to think that God has this fierce determination not to let go of me.

You’ve seen the Internet meme, **“If you feel distant from God, guess who moved.”** I like that because I think it’s absolutely right. Not all Internet memes contain good theology, as you know, but that one does.

I move away all the time. Every day. Several times a day, in fact. Like the child wandering away from his mother in a store. That’s me. I was that way at three, and I am that way today.

But God – and this is one of the most comforting dimensions of my faith – God will never let go. God will not give up. God has never given up on me. Or on you.

Luke 15 is a famous chapter in the New Testament. If you don’t know it, you should, and I challenge you to spend some time with it.

For quite a few years, partly because I identified with one of the people in this chapter, I’ll let you guess which one, it was my favorite chapter in the Bible. I used to preach from it at least once a month. (Not really, but it sometimes seemed that way. I kept coming back to it again and again.)

Anyway, in Luke 15 Jesus tells three consecutive parables, and each one has the same basic structure – the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the son. That last parable – what we like to call “the Parable of the Prodigal Son” – is a bit longer and a bit more complicated than the other two and probably deserves a sermon of its own.

So, let’s take a look today at the first two parables – the lost sheep and the lost coin.

The first two verses of chapter 15 – which introduce these three parables – tell us all we need to know: Tax collectors and sinners, Pharisees and scribes. That was the audience. And quite an audience it was too.

We sometimes think of the Pharisees – in fact, we *usually* think of the Pharisees – as the bad guys, the villains of the story, the antagonists, and maybe at some level they are the bad guys ... but I want you to see that they are also the good guys. They are very much the good guys. We know them. Our lives are filled with people like them. The church – every church I have ever served – is filled with them.

They are the law-abiding citizens. They were the ones who could be counted on – always and in every situation – to do the right thing.

And there is nothing wrong with that, is there?

Like the older brother in the last parable, they play by the rules, they are loyal and honest, they give you a full day's work, they might be annoying (as older siblings often are) but they are never the ones who get into trouble (unlike some younger siblings I know).

This birth order issue has been around a long time, hasn't it?

The tax collectors, on the other hand, were despised for a good reason. You would have hated them too. They collaborated with Rome, the occupying power, and they paid themselves out of what they collected – usually quite a bit. They lived well, when many people around them did not.

I don't even know any tax collectors, and I find myself getting irritated with them!

And as for the sinners, maybe there is a reason that people thought of them as sinners. They didn't get that label for no reason.

The issue here – as far as Luke is concerned – is not who is good and who is bad. There is no dispute about that. The issue is that the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling – the *good guys* were grumbling – and they were grumbling that Jesus showed more interest in the tax collectors and sinners than in them.

To them, that did not make sense.

“This fellow” – which is somewhat disrespectful – like saying “this guy” – “this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

That word “welcomes” is kind of a weak translation here, I think. What Luke means to say is that Jesus *embraced* them. He opened his arms to them. He invited them into an intimate relationship.

And so, Jesus, who always had an astonishing grasp of his audience and what they were really thinking – notice that no one asked him a question here – Jesus simply began to teach: The story says, **“He told them this parable.”**

And the parable begins with a question: **“Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”**

And the proper answer to that question is, **“No one!”**

No shepherd in the history of shepherding – I don't claim to be an expert, but this is so obvious even a beginner like me knows the answer – no shepherd in his right mind would ever leave the flock in a treacherous place like the wilderness to go in search of a single sheep who is lost.

One of the problems here may be the song I learned as a child in Sunday school. Do you remember this one?

There were ninety and nine that safely lay

In the shelter of the fold,

But one was out on the hills away,

Far off from the gates of gold-

*Away on the mountains wild and bare,
Away from the shepherd's care,
Away from the shepherd's care.*

Well, nice hymn, but it gets the story wrong. The “ninety and nine” were not safe “in the shelter of the fold.” They were in the wilderness. That’s what the story says. And no human shepherd would have left them there.

The next parable begins, **“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?”** That one might be a little less obvious. I might put some time into finding a lost silver coin. And maybe you would too.

But the *expected* answer – the way that Jesus sets up this parable – is that no one would.

And even the last parable, which I said I wasn’t going to talk about, has the same implied question: **“What father among you wouldn’t welcome home a lost son – and throw a feast for him, and kill the fatted calf, and put a ring on his finger?”** Who wouldn’t do that?

And again, the expected answer is that **no** father – not in that particular culture, anyway – no father would ever think of acting in such a way. Fathers in that culture did not run down the road to chase after a son. Wasn’t done. No father would throw a feast for a son who had behaved so disgracefully.

And everyone there that day knew it.

But – and here is the astonishing teaching ability of Jesus on full display – we know a father who would do exactly that thing. We know a shepherd who would leave 99 sheep to fend for themselves – not in the “shelter of the fold” but in the wilderness – in search of one who is lost.

We know this father. Don’t we? He is our father in heaven, and he would do these things.

No one else would, but he would.

A few chapters later – in Luke’s gospel – Jesus says, “The son of man came to seek and to save the lost.” That is the mission. The son of man did not come to seek and to save the 99 sheep who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place. You already have your “reward,” Jesus says in still another place.

It’s the lost who need a savior.

Last week I mentioned that the churches I have served over the years have always been filled with good people who wanted to be better people. Very few people I have known in my ministry have thought of themselves as lost people, or broken people, or desperate people. They were always good people, smart people, well-educated people, who very much wanted other people to think of them as good people.

Failure, when it occurred, was a reason to stay home – and not show up at church for a few weeks, or sometimes for a few years.

People who experienced brokenness sometimes didn’t know if they were welcome because – well, because church (the ones I have served) always seemed to be for the good people, the ninety and nine.

One time I spoke with a man from my church who never came to worship. His wife came faithfully every Sunday morning, but he was never there, even though his name was on the membership list. And at a party one time – you should never get stuck talking to me at a party – at a party one time I asked him about it.

And he told me that on Sunday mornings he liked to attend his meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I didn't tell him that there are meetings every day of the week that he could attend, but I did ask why he made that choice.

And he said, **“Because it's more authentic than church. People are real at those meetings. They know their need. They don't pretend, and if they do, we call them out. We don't let them get away with pretending.”**

I have never forgotten that conversation.

I got into church work because I had experienced God's grace in an overwhelming way, because at some point God found me (and not the other way around), and I have wanted ever since to be with people who yearned for this same experience.

But those are not often the people I meet. There are exceptions. Of course, there are. There are wonderful exceptions, but mostly I meet good people at church – or people who want me to think they are just fine.

Tell me this: why do we have such a hard time saying, **“I was lost, but now I'm found. I was blind, but now I see. And all of heaven is rejoicing because this sinner has come home”**?

The next time someone asks you why you go to church, you could say, **“Well, I've read several books on the subject, and explored all of the major religions, and I decided that Christianity made the most sense.”**

You could say that – I hear some version of that all the time – but what about this instead: **“You know, I was lost, truly and profoundly lost, until God found me, and now (I can't really explain it) it feels as though I have come home.**

Will you pray with me?