

OAKRIDGE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Worth Looking For

Luke 15: 1-10

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Our gospel reading today is two parts of a three-part series of parables on the lost – a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. The story of the Lost Sheep is also recorded in the gospel of Matthew, but the other two are not – they are unique to the gospel of Luke.

We are told right at the beginning that Jesus is telling these stories because the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling, and Jesus wanted to let them know they were grumbling about the wrong thing – the people who were following him, tax collectors and sinners – the scribes and Pharisees would prefer to have them taken out instead of restored. It is what they had learned with all of their legalistic rituals – to do the right things, to stay pure – they are bound to the Law – a law that kept expanding with each new circumstance or situation – they lived in fear of doing the wrong thing or being contaminated by the wrong type of person.

And so Jesus asks what they are likely thinking is the unthinkable, “Which one of you having a hundred sheep ...” Imagine that you are a shepherd and you have 100 sheep, I wonder if they all just looked at each other thinking that would be hard to imagine because being a shepherd was not a career of any status – it was a lowly job. Shepherds were not highly respected - they were dirty from being out in the fields all the time with sheep and they didn’t follow rituals and rules like everyone else – they didn’t get to church in time, or maybe at all because they were too far out with the sheep. Some of the people hearing Jesus, the Scribes and Pharisees were highly ritualistic and rule oriented, fixated on cleanliness, and the others, the tax collectors and sinners may not have had any frame of reference or understanding of the shepherd’s life, and in all probability the shepherds wouldn’t have the time to be there. So everyone there had to stretch their imaginations ...and with the parable of the lost sheep Jesus paints them a picture of God’s mission. William Barclay says this chapter of Luke is like a gospel within a gospel – the good news Jesus came to tell – God never gives up on looking for the lost.

So, you men, if you had 100 sheep and lost one of them, you would leave the 99 in the wilderness – not a safe place - and go look for the lost sheep wouldn’t you, you would look until you found it, wouldn’t you? The Pharisees might be thinking, “You’ve got to be kidding. Why would you leave 99 for 1 sheep? – not practical at all! Shouldn’t there be an acceptable % of loss?”

Here’s what the shepherd looks like to God, a sleepless, far-sighted weather-beaten protector, leaning on his staff and looking out over his scattered sheep, ... every one of them on his heart, he knows them by name; ... to give us a frame of reference, that one sheep might be like our house pet...they become like one of the family.

If a sheep was lost the shepherd would risk his life to find it, and *if it were a communal flock and the other shepherds arrived home with the rest of the flock, there would be shouts of joy and thanksgiving*

when they saw the shepherd striding home with the lost sheep across his shoulders. And if it were just a lone shepherd, Jesus says, "...he'll call his friends to celebrate, he's that happy!

Then, when Jesus adds that 'just so' comparison at the end, the tax collectors and sinners must have felt their hearts stirring....

That is what God is like. There is great joy in heaven when one sinner repents - returns to God – takes on a new perspective, God's perspective. The Kingdom of Heaven is upside down to ours *because God is extravagant!* ... and so Scripture speaks of Jesus the Good Shepherd – he keeps looking for the lost at any cost.

Jesus says, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents –he understands God's perspective, God's mission – the 99 righteous should already know that....

In the second parable Jesus asks, "What woman?" – Luke does that a number of times, giving the man's perspective and then the woman's – what woman who had ten silver coins, and who lost one, wouldn't search for it , wouldn't light up the dim house, sweep it, and search carefully until she found it?

Do you ever look frantically for something you consider of great value? Some little thing,... maybe someone would say to you, "don't worry, it's only one coin, you still have 9, be thankful for that...." But to you it has much more significance that 'just a silver coin'. William Barclay writes of two possible reasons for the coin being so important; one, the coin would be worth a day's wages and to a poor woman could mean having enough to feed her family or not; two, the coin could be one of ten that a woman wore on her head if she were married, like a wedding ring - a part of her identity.

There are times in my life when I go looking for things, little things that take on great meaning because they are what I really need to get somewhere or do some work, whether it be car keys or a memory stick, if I don't find the item I have this sense of dread looming and I can't rest until I check every possible place, and then keep looking again and again until I find it.

Either way that coin had great significance in the woman's life and she is determined to find it. The woman who lost the silver coin kept looking until she found it. She never gave up. The tax collectors and sinners hear it again, "just so"- that's what God is like.

Hallelujah! She found it – "come rejoice with me my friends! I have found the lost coin!" Likewise the angels of God will be joyful over one sinner who repents – one who has a shift in perspective and lines her priorities up with God's.

Which one of the tax collectors and sinners would not have hope after hearing these first two parables – to hear that the search for sinners is one that never ends – there is such joy in heaven when they repent – shift their perspectives.... It is no wonder they follow Jesus and want to spend time with him – he is the only one who gives them hope. The scribes and Pharisees ostracize them and make them feel like they are worth nothing. Jesus makes them feel like they are worth looking for.

Our gospel reading ends here, but so far Jesus has just compared lost sinners to sheep and coins, and he says they are worth looking for because even one found brings great rejoicing in heaven.

But what happens if one who should go looking for the lost doesn't, and what if it is a person?

The 3rd parable of the lost son addresses that and it is directed at the grumbling scribes and Pharisees, those who are responsible for teaching the people about the love of God, but instead heap judgment on them. They are the older brother, the one responsible for looking for the lost brother. But, unlike the shepherd and the woman, they don't even bother to start looking for the lost brother, never mind keep looking. And they don't rejoice when the brother returns – 'is found' – because he remembered how good his father was to him – he repents. No, they grumble because Jesus loves those sinners and tax collectors. The Pharisees as religious leaders were responsible for shepherding the flock of God, but they didn't love the people.

Like the shepherd and the woman, we have this sense that God didn't give up – the Father was the only one who could take the son back and he 'watched for his son's return', and celebrated when his lost son came home - there was great rejoicing...and though the older brother refused to join in... the Father didn't give up... the celebration goes on.

Which one of us is worth looking for? Do we think of anyone as a lost cause – or is there one who thinks of themselves as beyond hope? These parables speak to the fact that people, those who don't know the love of God, are worth looking for and finding – that is the gospel – the "good news" is God never gives up!

God sent a new older brother to look for the lost, a Shepherd, to bring the lost home – Jesus looked for and found sinners throughout his life, and the gospel writer records yet another example after his death and resurrection of Jesus going after the lost until they repented.

On the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) Jesus goes after two disciples who were ready to walk away from their community of faith because they lost hope. Jesus understands their grief and is with them ... but he's also trying to pull them out of this grief, and sympathy won't do it... They need to look at this from a clear perspective ... a bigger perspective. "...remember what you were taught – remember what the prophets told you!!! ... how does it affect everyone, and who's really in charge..." Jesus says, "I know - God never gives up."

Jesus walks *the whole 7 miles with them*, and just in time, 'at the end of the road' when it looks as if he will keep walking, the two disciples invite Jesus in, "stay with us, it's too late to travel on."

Yes! Jesus gives them a visual memory that will open their eyes and their hearts. He took the bread and blessed it and broke it – and then he's gone.

And they say, "How could we have missed it... but didn't we really know as he talked to us – that was Jesus!" – they went right back to Jerusalem, to their community of faith, and they said, 'yes, it's true –

Jesus is alive – our eyes were opened at the end of the road when we invited Jesus in – he broke bread with us – ...we believe you!

What a great ending for those disciples – there is rejoicing in heaven! Our brother, Jesus went after them like the shepherd did the lost sheep helping them return, like the woman who kept searching for the lost coin until she found it.

We are to do the same. Which one of us is to walk with someone who has trouble seeing the Lord, the whole 7 miles to the end if need be? People are worth looking for.

Just as the disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, today, we remember what Jesus did to bring us back to God.

All glory be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Focus Quote:

Every day you and I walk through God's shop. Every day we brush up against objects of incalculable worth to Him. People.

John Ortberg

Sources:

William Barclay. *Daily Study Bible (Rev. ed.), The Gospel of Luke (1975)*

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The Bible (NRSV)(1989)

The Living with God Bible (NRSV)(2005)