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Luke 15:1-32

Fifth Message

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ARE YOU LOST?

SERIES: PARABLES OF THE KINGDOM

One of my pet peeves is that I hate to lose anything. Losing things really gets to me. If I find that something is mislaid at home, I immediately drop whatever I'm doing and start searching for it. First, I ask my wife where it is. This upsets her because she thinks I'm blaming her. But of course, I would never blame her. An argument quickly ensues. Then I go on what would probably look to others like a wild and irrational search of the house. Every closet, even the attic, has to be searched. I usually end up asking my wife once more if she's seen it, and then a worse argument ensues. I cannot rest until I find whatever is lost.

Our last study in this series on the parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke brings us to the subject of being lost. Here we discover that God does not like to lose things either. If we have a fetish for finding lost things, surprisingly, we share this characteristic with God. In these parables Jesus shares several stories that reveal God's character and his perspective in dealing with lost people.

Luke 15:

Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

And He told them this parable, saying, "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

And He said, "A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my

father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! 'I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found. 'And they began to be merry. Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began entreating him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him. ' And he said to him, 'My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 'But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

(Luke 15 NASB)

The context of this chapter is Jesus' receiving sinners and eating with them. In that first century culture, sharing a meal was equivalent to sharing life with one's guests. In the East today as in the past, a nobleman may feed any number of needy persons as a sign of his generosity, but he will not eat with them. When guests are "received," however, the one receiving them eats with them. In addition to eating with sinners, there is a possibility that Jesus was hosting them. This setting is combined here. The truth that Jesus gives is always context specific, and as we will see, the timing and placement of this parable is important.

Jesus' hospitality met with murmuring and grumbling on the part of the Scribes and Pharisees. The verb is present tense; they were doing it all the time. The word is used in Exodus 16:2 in the story of Israel's journey to Canaan. The Israelites ran into trouble and danger in this unmapped territory and they longed for the security of Egypt. To the Pharisees, being in the company of tax-gatherers and sinners in Samaria was like being in unmapped territory. They wanted the safety of religion and moral righteousness, and so they grumbled.

The parables of Jesus that follow, in verses 4-32, are a defense of his actions.

Actually there are four parables here, not three. They spiral in intensity: 100 sheep→10 coins→2 sons→1 son; and they are told in doublets of two and two. The parable of the lost sheep opens with a shock when we note that it was addressed to Pharisees. Throughout the Scriptures, a shepherd is considered a noble symbol. Moses was a shepherd. Ezekiel referred to kings as shepherds. Even God himself is described as a shepherd in Psalm 23. But by contrast, first century shepherds were considered unclean. For the Pharisee, a sinner was either an immoral person who did not keep the law or one who engaged in a proscribed activity, like herding sheep. Thus, any man who thought shepherds were unclean would naturally be offended if he were addressed as one.

The shepherd in the story was clearly negligent in his duties. He was probably a hired hand, or a less affluent member of the extended family. He counted the sheep in the wilderness, discovered that one was lost, and then left the flock there. A second shepherd, it is assumed, returned the sheep to the village.

The outcome of this story gave rise to two occasions for rejoicing. The first time was when the shepherd found the lost sheep. This is remarkable. A lost sheep will lie down and refuse to budge, so the shepherd had to carry it over a long distance. Surprisingly, this man rejoiced despite the trek that still lay before him. The second occasion for rejoicing occurred in the village when the shepherd returned with the sheep. The villagers rejoiced that the shepherd was safe, and they also rejoiced over the sheep, since the flock probably was owned by one or more of them. A lost sheep was a community loss, a found sheep an occasion for community joy.

The parable of the lost coin reinforces the parable of the lost sheep. The structure of the story is a bit simpler, but it has almost the same format. Here the theme of joy comes in the middle of the story. Since cash was a rare commodity, the lost coin was valuable to the woman. In those times women were very restricted in their movements, thus the coin may well have been lost in the house, not in the wilderness. Certainly it could be found if the searcher put forth the effort. And notice that Jesus used a woman as the main character in the story, thereby rejecting Pharisaic attitudes toward certain groups in society.

The story of the prodigal son, verses 11-32, is a double parable (like the story in 4-11), but there are many more details given in this parable compared with the first two. (A lost person gets more attention than a sheep or a coin.)

The younger son asked his father for his inheritance. Such a shocking demand would be unheard of. It would warrant a beating, since the request really was implying that the son wished his father were dead. In Middle Eastern literature, from ancient times to the present, there is no incidence of any son, old or young, asking for his inheritance from a father who was still in good health.

In his response, the father demonstrated great love for his son. He may not have had provision for his later years, yet he allowed his son to sell all that was coming to him while he himself was still living. The text says that the son left quickly. The speed with which he acted could well indicate the disapproval of the community for his actions. A family estate was very important; selling it off was no small matter. The older son went along with the arrangement. He did not protest the sale or try to reconcile his father and brother. His relationship with his father was not what it should have been. We can only imagine the anguish of the father's heart over this turn of events.

The younger son went to a foreign country and squandered all his inheritance in wild living. No one had any doubt that this included keeping company with prostitutes (v. 30). A lone Jew in a faraway country lacking money and friends would have been especially vulnerable in a time of famine. The young man was driven to desperation. He joined himself to a citizen (a reference to tax collectors perhaps). He fed pigs, an unthinkable task to a proud Jew. No one gave him anything in his time of need. The verb is imperfect: "no one was giving to him." Clearly he wasn't earning enough to keep him alive.

At last he came to his senses. He had left home to find his freedom, but instead had found servitude and bondage far worse than anything his father's hired men had to put up with. He came to a form of repentance in the foreign land. He still had a plan to escape his situation: he would be a hired servant. As such he would be a free man with his own income, living independently in the village. His social status would not be inferior to that of his father and brother. He could maintain his pride and independence. And he would be able to repay his father. He wanted to admit his failure, but he didn't feel useless. He knew his father could fashion him into a good workman.

When the prodigal son arrived home, he was welcomed by his father and by his father's servants in a remarkable way. He would not be just a servant, he would be a son. The father did not actively look for his son, as the characters in the parables of the sheep and the coin did, yet he was seeking him all the same, with passive energy. He probably had already decided how to respond if the youth returned. When the son finally appeared on the horizon, the father was filled with compassion. He gave him a robe, a ring, and shoes. There was a great celebration and they kill the fattened calf.

The fourth story has to do with the older son. Actually, the first three stories are told for the sake of the fourth. The older son was doubly lost: he was lost to both his father and brother. When he discovered the cause for the celebration, he became angry and refused to share in the rejoicing. He chose instead to humiliate his father publicly by quarreling with him while the guests were present—a very serious turn of events.

The conversation between son and father indicates that the older son was lost also. The younger son was estranged and rebellious while he was absent from the house, but the older son was estranged and rebellious in his heart while he was yet living in the house. The estrangement and rebellion of the younger son were evident in his surrender to his passions and in his request to leave his father's house. The estrangement and rebellion of the older son were evident in his anger and his refusal to enter the house. The older son did not address his father with honor. He claimed he had slaved for him, thereby demonstrating the spirit of a slave, not a son. He felt he had not disobeyed him, but this very notion was a sign of disobedience. He accused his father of favoritism. He said he was not part of the family and would like to be merry with his friends, the same desire expressed by the younger son. He also attacked his brother, referring to him as "this son of yours," not "my brother." The older son preferred to not have fellowship with his father than accept his parent's treatment of his brother.

In this he was acting like the Pharisees. They thought they had it all together. They were religiously secure, but they were not. They were angry because Jesus was eating with tax-gatherers and sinners, loving the unclean people who wanted to come home from a far country. But their pretense of having it altogether prevented them from experiencing the joy of being found. The Pharisees preferred

to not have fellowship with the Heavenly Father than accept Jesus' treatment of the prodigal brothers.

The story does not end at verse 32. The Pharisees would have discerned that the fourth story was work in progress. This worried them. They were grumbling, just like the older son, so they were left to finish the story for themselves.

We can recognize at least four themes in these stories. First, these parables demonstrate the nature of the Father's love. The character of the Father is likened in turn to that of the shepherd, the woman, and the father of the two sons. In each case something was lost. In the story of the two sons, both were lost, and to each the father demonstrated unconditional grace and love.

Notice the father's dramatic actions when the prodigal son returned home. He expressed great love for him, protected him from the hostility of the village, and thus restored him to fellowship in the community. The father "ran" to his wayward son. This was a humiliating act; a nobleman with long flowing robes would never run to anyone. The son had felt completely rejected in a foreign land, but he was utterly accepted by his father who kissed him again and again in a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. He wanted him to have the best robe, most likely his own. We are reminded of the words of Isaiah, "For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness." The ring probably was a signet ring, which meant that he was trusted in a remarkable way.

But then the father went beyond anything we might expect or imagine, for in his conversation with his older son we recognize that for the second time that day he demonstrated unexpected love. He went to him and entreated him. He did not judge, criticize or reject; he did not scold or rebuke. He poured out his love upon his older son because he wanted him to understand grace and to rejoice with him over the return of the prodigal. He assured him that his rights were fully protected, that he was not a servant, but an heir; he had given him everything.

The story demonstrates the fact that the Heavenly Father has a reckless, relentless, pursuing, searching, passionate love for lost children whom he wants to return home. He has an inexhaustible yearning for the misplaced. He drops everything and runs to us, even when we are angry, disappointed and selfish. He doesn't tell us what we have done wrong. He doesn't hold grudges, resenting us as we parents often do with our own children. He wants us so much he will go to any trouble to woo us back to him. The ultimate proof of this is that, as the apostle Paul says in Romans, Jesus died for us while we were yet sinners. He gave his life while we were still lost, while the outcome of our life was still uncertain. Amazing love! Amazing grace!

Last April, a group from our singles ministry traveled down to the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico to help roof a church in a remote Mayan village. For two days we worked there in a village so remote that a 7-kilometer road took 45 minutes to drive. Many of the people did not speak Spanish, only Mayan. There was not store in the village. Once when we wanted a soda to drink, we found that there were only seven cold sodas in the whole place. After we had finished work in the evening we planned to show the Jesus film that has been circulating all around the world. We sewed sheets together to make a screen, and the locals nailed our primitive screen to the side of the church. Everyone came out to see the movie: women and children up front, men standing around the sides, teenagers in the back. There was nothing else playing in town, no television, no movies, no distractions. I sat on a wall, watching a movie whose language I could not understand, yet I understood everything that was going

on. Here we are, I mused, 25 people taking a week out of their lives, spending a lot of money, yet it's worth every bit of it if one person finds Christ, or perhaps more accurately, if one lost soul is found. This is the nature of the Father's relentless love.

The second theme running through these parables has to do with sonship. The Father's desire is for us to repent, not that we might become slaves, but full-fledged sons and daughters. In the story, being found is equated with repentance. The older son thought he could save himself, but the prodigal son came to the place where he knew he was powerless to do this. The younger son was found, but the story ends with the jury still out on the older son, although the father went out and found both of them.

The love of the Father has purpose and desire—the purpose of being found, and his desire that we become true sons and daughters, not just slaves living in the house. The shoes given to the younger son signified his being a free man in the house, not a servant. And the fact that the servants put the shoes on his feet indicated that they accepted him as their master.

One son was restored from death and from servanthood. He was given a robe, a ring, and shoes. The other son insisted on remaining a servant. Although he lived in the house, he did not regard himself as a son. He thought of himself as a slave, although his father wanted him to be a son, too. The apostle Paul recalls this theme in these words from Galatians 4:1-7: "Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything... But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons... Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God."

This is one of the hardest things for Christians to really believe in their hearts. God doesn't want us to come in through the back door. He doesn't want us to think that since he has stooped down to save us, we have to live as second-class citizens. He doesn't want us to eat and sleep out back in the slave quarters. But we are like the prodigal, aren't we? We think we can no longer be sons so we are content to merely live in the house as slaves. While it is true that we do not deserve his grace and love, yet he embraces us fully and wants us to be his sons and daughters, living boldly and confidently in the house, with full access to him.

Joy is the third theme evident in these stories. Being found is an occasion for joy indescribable. Anytime we find something we thought was lost, we experience a great sense of joy, don't we? Following our trip to the Yucatan, I had hardly entered our house when my daughter came to me and asked, "Where is your copy of 'Old Jules'? I have to do a book report for school." I searched the book shelf, but it was not there. I was dead tired, but I immediately set about searching for that book. While rummaging through an old box of papers I found a photograph of my father, my two brothers and myself that I had been looking for for 15 years. I can't describe my joy in finding that photograph. If I can get that excited about a photograph that I found, and a shepherd can get excited about a sheep which he found, and a woman can get excited about finding a lost coin, imagine the joy of the Father over one sinner who repents and is found!

In these stories then the shepherd found his lost sheep, the woman found her lost coin, and the father found his lost son. In each case that which had been lost was found, and in each case there was celebration and rejoicing as a result. And the joy was expressed and experienced in community. In the case of the prodigal son, the selec-

tion of a calf rather than a sheep or goat meant that the entire village was invited to the great celebration.

The principle of joy is repeated in the first three stories: "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (7); "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (10); "Let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found" (24). The shepherd and the father considered the burden of restoration to be joy as well. Jesus had the same anticipation of joy, as the writer of Hebrews declares in 12:2: "who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

The father of the two wayward sons could do nothing other than rejoice and celebrate. This was his very nature, and this is God's nature, too. His heart aches over those who are lost and rejoices over those who are found. The conversion of a sinner, the finding of one who is lost, brings indescribable joy to him and the angels of heaven. This indeed is a cause for the community of faith to rejoice.

During a baptism service at our family camp weekend this year people shared their stories of how they had been found. One young woman took everyone by surprise by coming up front during the sharing to join her father and brother, was planning on being baptized. She began to cry, and then her father began to cry. Soon just about everyone there was in tears. She said, "Now is the time for me to express the fact that I have been found." As we went down to the lake, two or three others came forward spontaneously to be baptized. The joy on the faces of these people and the joy experienced in community was the highlight of the entire weekend. They had been found by the relentless God who would not give up on them.

Finally, these parables have a theme of decisions that must be made. All of us must recognize our condition of being lost, whether we are lost in the wilderness or in the house.

The parable of the prodigal son is really misnamed. A more fitting title would be the parable of the lost sons, or the parable of the father's love, for this story portrays two types of sinful men and illustrates the nature of their sin and its results. One son was lawless without the law, the other lawless within the law. Both rebelled, both broke their father's heart, and both ended up in a far country, one physically, the other spiritually, yet the father demonstrated the same unexpected love to each. For both, his love was critical if they were to become sons.

Are you lost? This is the question each of us has to answer at some point in our lives. Perhaps you are like the sheep in the wilderness. Maybe you are like the younger son. You have wandered far from home and you are lost. You sought freedom but you found enslavement. You are out of resources and no one is giving you anything. You want to go home. The good news for you is that Jesus says you can come home. You can never out-sin the grace of God. He accepts tax-gatherers and sinners. He searches relentlessly for lost sheep and lost children. He is waiting for you with arms outstretched, ready to kiss you again and again and clothe you with his best garments, the Lord Jesus himself, and join with you in feast and celebration. What you have to admit to yourself is, "I am lost. I want to come to Christ, to live in the house through the merits of his blood shed for me."

Or perhaps you are like the coin, like the older son. You are in the house, not the far country. You have always gone to church and have seemingly been an obedient son or daughter. But in your heart you are not. You are just as lost as the younger brother. Sometimes it is easier to see how lost we are and to confess it if we travel far from home and wreck our lives seeking independence and freedom. But if we are like the Pharisees and think we have done pretty well, then it is much more difficult to see our condition through our veil of religious and moral pride. We think we don't need to be found. We are angry with God's acceptance of prodigals, people who are unclean and who fail to live up to our standards. Paul was a prime example of this kind of attitude before he came to Christ. We become like this if we ever find ourselves tiring of the testimonies of wretches who have been saved by grace. Aren't there people like me, moral and upright, who come to Christ? we ask.

If you find yourself in this category of person, for you the story is unfinished. You have to fill in the last stanza yourself. What will you write? That you remained angry and refused to enter the house and celebrate with your brother? Or will you write that you agree you are lost, that you want forgiveness and sonship with the Father, and you will enter the house to celebrate both you and your brother being found?

We sang "Amazing Grace" earlier this morning. This hymn was written by John Newton, one of the great Christian preachers and hymn writers of the 19th century. John Newton's mother died when he was seven years old. With his father at sea, he was left largely on his own. As a young man he was conscripted into the British Navy, but he deserted and became a slave-trader in Africa. Betty Carlson, in her book *Your Life Is Worth Living*, says of John Newton, "he was a wreck of a man...he was a hard, rough, dirty sailor with a foul mouth and an appetite for rotten living. He hated life and life hated him." But somehow, a copy of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, was placed into his hands, and John Newton began the process of being found. For six years he struggled to find inner peace until finally he began to love life, and life began to love him. When he entered the ministry, he wanted people to know that he had a marvelous secret to share. He traveled all over England sharing this secret in his preaching. Toward the end of his life he insisted on preaching every Sunday even though he was nearly blind and needed an assistant to stand with him in the pulpit. One Sunday, during his sermon, he repeated the phrase, "Jesus is precious." His assistant whispered to him, "You've already said that twice." Newton replied, "Yes, I've said it twice, and I'm going to say it again." Then, with all the force he could muster, with a frail voice he cried out once more, "Jesus is precious!" John Newton knew the joy of being found.

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound—
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

One day in Samaria, under the watchful eyes of the disapproving Pharisees, Jesus was receiving tax gatherers and sinners. There can be no question that, just like those lost people whom Jesus sat down to eat with that day, everyone is lost. The only question remaining is whether we are willing to be found.

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