

Luke 15:1-10
The God Who Seeks the Lost, Near and Far
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9-4-16

This summer, we are looking together at a series of passages from Luke's Gospel in which Jesus offers us a look at the dream God has for this world. He calls it the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is, very simply, wherever and whenever God's vision and reign become real and known among his people in the world. When Jesus began his ministry, he announced that the Kingdom of God had come near. Jesus was the living inauguration of God's kingdom, the book of Colossians tells us he is the first born of all creation.

What we aim to do in our time here together is allow our lives to be shaped by that Kingdom vision. It's possible that we can come up with all sorts of ideas about what God is like on our own. Have you heard this one? "God helps those who help themselves." Not a kingdom image. We can, on the one hand, allow our minds to be shaped by what **WE** think about God, which may make us feel good and look good, which may make us comfortable with the decisions we make and the way we use our lives, but actually run the risk of being very far from God.

That is not what we are going to do as a church. Instead, we will do our very best to see the way Jesus pictures the Kingdom of God, and let that picture permeate our minds and move us out into the future together.

The stories we're going to look at this morning are in Luke 15. So I would invite you to take out or turn on your Bibles, or turn to the screens and read along with me as we look at two very important pictures Jesus painted about the kind of people God is pursuing. Jesus, again and again, is coming to people and addressing their notions of who is and who is not acceptable to God...among the Pharisees and Scribes this question was a regular topic of conversation. Jesus does this through parables so that we can see ourselves in the story. In them, he warns us against self-righteousness, against assuming that we are on the right side and those people over there are on the wrong side. But he also tells them so that those who are prone to despair, thinking that God could never love someone like me, might meet the God who tirelessly pursues them with his love. This is why Jesus taught in parables.

Let's look at his words now. By way of introduction, Luke says:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable...

Around Jesus, there are two groups of people. There are, on the one hand, sinners and tax collectors. They were near him because they wanted to hear from Jesus. Everyone who is far away from God will experience an inner emptiness and a yearning to hear good news. Everyone who is walking the path away from God will have within them something that yearns to hear the words of hope and life. Their hearts will be like a desert that is dry and parched. In this moment, some of the crowd gathered around him are like this, dry, thirsty, yearning for good news.

Now on the other hand, there are those gathered, the Scribes and Pharisees, who are gathered around Jesus for an altogether different reason. They're there because they are upset by something that Jesus is doing. In the words of Luke, they are upset because Jesus **“receives sinners and eats with them.”**

Jesus is receiving and extending such kindness to these sinners, that in their minds it seems as though he is condoning their behavior. In their minds, his gestures of kindness and hospitality are being mistaken for blanket acceptance and approval of everything they do, and that is concerning to the Pharisees and Scribes.

So in the crowd are two groups: one that is there to hear good news, and another who is there because they are concerned that Jesus is receiving the wrong kind of people. And what he does in this moment is tells them a story describing how God thinks of his children—those that are far and those that are near.

Listen to how he continues: **“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that 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 that was lost.’ 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.”**

Jesus addresses the thinking of these Pharisees by telling a story with the simplest and most understandable image he could imagine. Everybody in the audience knew about shepherds and sheep—so do we. Every day they would see them in their villages and on every hill and pasture around them. And he says to them, Imagine you are a shepherd. You are there with your flock and realize that one of them is missing, you only have 99%. Every shepherd would know how many are in their flock, and when one wanders off into the wilderness, they would be concerned.

The wilderness around the hills of Galilee is a very dangerous places for sheep. Imagine one of your sheep, Jesus says, is off in the wilderness and all alone. What Jesus is asking is that every one of his listeners would imagine in their minds the picture of helplessness, hopelessness, and loneliness. Sheep are social creatures, they are content when they are with other sheep, but when they are isolated, when they are removed from fellowship with the other sheep, when they are in the wilderness and vulnerable—exposed to the elements—their response is to just lie down and die. Not because they don't want to or because they become despondent or melancholy—sheep don't get melancholy, they're too dumb. The sheep are unable to find water on their own, and so when they are lost and alone, they don't know what to do; they just lie down to die.

To be a sheep lost in the wilderness is to be hopeless, and there is only one way that the sheep is going to be saved, and that is if the Shepherd leaves the other 99 and comes out after them. Now Jesus is not just telling them a story about shepherds and sheep, he's telling them a story about themselves. To be a tax collector in this day was to be a crony of the empire, who cheats and swindles people out of their money. A tax collector was someone who was despised and looked down upon by everyone around him. They were lost and isolated because of their job. Day after day, they would have thought to themselves that the world around them was a wasteland in which they wandered lonely and alone.

To be a sinner, in whatever shape that takes, is to be someone who for one reason or another is far from God. They find themselves swept away in some activity or behavior that causes them to be reviled and rejected. And because of it, they may not be welcomed and valued by the rest of their village, and in that way sometimes we sinners can feel like sheep lost in the wilderness.

And the way Jesus speaks to them is by telling them a story of a man who has 100 sheep and loses one. But instead of saying, “Well, at least I’ve still got the 99”, decides to leave the flock and pursue the one lost and lonely sheep. The one that is lost matters so much to me that I am willing to put myself in danger to go off and retrieve that one.

What Jesus wants those grumblers to know is this: you see someone who is lost because of their own poor choices or their own negligence. But what God sees is one precious life that needs to be rescued and brought back into the fold. And God is willing to do whatever it takes to bring it back to safety. Notice when the shepherd finally finds that one lost sheep he doesn’t say, why did you wander off? why didn’t you come back? why were you so inconsiderate in making me come out here and look for you? No, the immediate response of the shepherd is to rejoice. He lifts the sheep onto his shoulders and carries him home, and when he finally arrives home, says to those around him, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.”

When the shepherd returns, Jesus says, he demonstrates the exact opposite emotion that was demonstrated earlier by those Pharisees—grumbling. Jesus says to the Pharisee and Scribes, **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.**

The lost sheep comes home into the safety of the fold not because of what the sheep does, but very simply, it is saved when the shepherd comes after it, hoists it up on his shoulders, and carries him home. That is what it means to return to God.

The lesson Jesus is teaching was about how God views people who are far from him. God’s desire is to bring back those who are lost. And on the surface, it would appear that this next story is really just the same story—told again for greater emphasis. But this time, instead of using the picture of sheep, Jesus uses a coin; instead of the field, he inserts a house. But there is a very important distinction we need to recognize if we are going to see the full weight of this story, and it has to do with location.

Listen to the next story: **“Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently 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 that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”**

What we see in this story is that being lost is not just a matter of location or proximity. What Jesus is saying in this moment is that it is possible for someone to be very near to God and still be totally lost. Instead of being lost in the wilderness, unable to find their way home and needing a shepherd to find them, the coin is lost inside the home. It would appear that the coin is very close to the master of the house, but in this moment it is actually completely lost.

Here's the rub: the Pharisees and Scribes were very serious about their walk with God, but didn't really know God. To Jesus, the Pharisees were like that coin that is hidden within the master's house. It is possible for someone to be very close to God, a regular attender to the house of God

Do any of you know the experience of being in the house, but still lost? Growing up, I did not have some lightning bolt, burning bush conversion experience. I didn't go from someone who beat up Sunday School kids, to being one of them. Nothing like that. I was raised in Church. I knew a lot about God, but I didn't know God. I was like a coin lost in the house. I loved going to youth group and I saw all these other kids who had a relationship with God and it felt like they were swimming in this vast lake of beautiful deep blue water, refreshing and cool, and I was sitting on the shore dipping my toe in the water, but never fully immersing myself in it.

I was someone who was lost close to God. And what is it to be a coin that is far away from the master's hand? It is squandered potential. You see, in the master's hand that coin can be spent up for the master's good purposes, but when it is lost in the house it cannot be used for the good work it was meant to do. This is what it means to be a coin lost in the house.

In this gathering, there are those among us who are like coins that are lost in the house. Maybe you are like someone who sits on the bank and watches the others swim, but you've never jumped in.

Jesus painted these two pictures because he wanted people to change. He wanted to transform their picture of God and allow that picture to shape the way they used their lives and allowed the master to use them. Jesus is like the Shepherd who finds lost sheep—far off, helpless, and hopeless. And Jesus finds lost coins, close to God, but out of the hand of the master and therefore unable to be used and spent up for the master's good purpose and mission for them. Every one of us can find ourselves in these stories, so where are you? Are you tired of trying to hold it all together? Are you tired of looking for meaning in things that can never satisfy? Are you dry and parched and hungry for living waters but can't seem to find the way? Let Jesus pick you up and bring you home.

Or are you here in the house but altogether lost to God? Are you a mountain of unrealized potential? Put yourself in the hands of the master and let God use your life up for his mission, allow yourself to be spent for the things that God intends for you.

This is what is true of the picture Jesus reveals of the Kingdom of God—it is a place where people give up. They give up the search for meaning and life alone and isolated, following after one appetite or another and allow the shepherd to throw them over his shoulders and carry them home. But it is also where people give up and give over their lives to the good purposes of the master, who uses their life for the mission he has for them. Because the truth is all of us are or were lost; it's just that our locations may have been different.

No matter what the case, Jesus is inviting you into his Kingdom, to be used, spent, purposed, and commissioned for the life that you were meant to live. Are you ready for that today? Then you need to be nourished for the road ahead. Or...are you yourself lost and ready to be carried back on the shoulders of Christ? Then you need to experience this manifold grace laid out for you and prepared for your salvation. This feast is the foretaste of God's Kingdom reign and the only way any of us comes to it is by recognizing that we are all lost sheep, we are all lost coins. On our own, we're capable of nothing, but the Gospel we proclaim is that Jesus Christ, the carpenter from Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God, Jesus paid it all, he broke the chains, he bridged the gap, he wiped the

slate clean, he accepted the just punishment for our misdeeds, and redeems us because he loves us, because he's the hound of heaven who seeks and finds what belongs to him.

And once he finds them comes home and says: **'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep and my lost coins.'**

Sheep? Coins? Come to the table and receive life in the master's care.