

Luke 15:1-10
Not Alone, Near or Far
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This morning, for those of you keeping score at home, is World Communion Sunday. In short, it is a time when we pause to remember that Christ's grace-filled, hope-giving body extends beyond these four walls. It even extends beyond our local fellowships. But by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the world, wherever Christ is proclaimed, his body exists. You and I are a part of a global family. So when Erica traveled to Cuba just a few weeks ago, she was down there getting acquainted with family.

And the thing about family, the thing about loved ones, is that we will do just about anything for them. And if that person is lost or in danger somehow, we will do just about anything to make sure they are brought safely home.

Over the last few weeks, as my wife Amy had to, once again, undergo yet another major surgery. We as her family insisted that she not have to go through a moment of this journey alone. The cancer treatment she has had to face brought some very isolating and lonely times, and the worry we faced is that going through it alone would cause her to feel...in a word, lost.

One of the most pernicious epidemics of our day in age is one that people all around us face. It pays no attention to social class, in fact those who are successful are just as likely to suffer as those who are poor. The epidemic I mean of course is that of loneliness and isolation. I heard a story from one of you this week about a person who is facing a life-threatening condition, and has been for some time, and it has caused their family to pull away from them, because it's just too hard.

This morning the passage we heard read for us by Caleb reminds us that the savior we worship is never alarmed or deterred by hard things. The God we gather to worship here together is the God that is pursuing you and me. He is the God who is pursuing the whole world with his grace and mercy—especially those who are lost. That may be someone you know, that may be a loved one or friend, or it may just be you yourself. God does not give up on you because you've wandered from his presence. He is the hound of heaven who is always in search of his own.

In our text today there are two groups of people around Jesus. 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, the Scribes and Pharisees, who are gathered around Jesus for an altogether different reason. They're there because Jesus is doing something of which they don't approve. Luke says, Jesus **“receives sinners and eats with them.”**

Jesus is receiving and extending hospitality to sinners. In their minds Jesus is condoning their behavior. In their minds his gestures of kindness and hospitality are being mistaken for blank check approval, and that is worrisome to the Pharisees and Scribes.

So, in this moment Jesus tells them a story about how God thinks of all his children—those that are far, and those that are near. 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 dangerous place 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 sheeps, when they are in the wilderness and vulnerable—exposed to the elements—their response is to just lay 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 pawn of the empire, who cheats and swindles members of his own community out of their money. A tax collector was someone who was despised and looked down upon by all of his neighbors. 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 welcome and valued by the rest of their village, and in that way someone 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 carelessness. 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, to be picked up by the Good Shepherd and carried to safety.

This is 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.

“Or what woman, having ten silver coins,[a] if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?”

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 also be totally 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 this house, but still feeling lost?

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.

Everyone 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? 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.

An author by the name of Hugh Reed tells this story of a man from his congregation:

Allan came to me at my previous church in Hamilton, wanting to be baptized. He was a child (or victim) of the “me decade” and felt compelled to leave home and family to find himself and, of course, lost himself, becoming a stranger to himself and the world, wandering the streets of Vancouver trapped in a world of drugs. One night he managed to get off the street for a night in one of the shelters. He crashed into the bunk, staring up at the ceiling, listening to the groans, and trying not to be overcome by the odors of the strangers in the bunks around him. He didn’t know where he was, he didn’t know who he was, but he wanted it to be over with and he considered how he might take his own life.

He was shaken out of these thoughts when someone came in and called out a name from another world.

“Is Allan Roberts here?”

That had been his name once but he hadn’t heard it for some time. He hardly knew Allan Roberts anymore. It couldn’t be him being called.

The caller persisted, “Is there anybody named Allan Roberts here?”

No one else answered and so Allan took a risk. “I’m Allan Roberts (or used to be).”

“Your mother’s on the phone.”

My mother, no, you’ve made a mistake. I don’t know where I am, how could my mother know where I am?

“If you’re Allan Roberts, your mother’s on the phone.”

Unsure what to expect, he went to the desk in the hall and took the receiver. “Allan,” it was his mother, “It’s time for you to come home.”

“Mom, I don’t know where I am, I have no money, you don’t know what I’m like anymore. I can’t go home.”

“It’s time for you to come home. There’s a Salvation Army officer who’s coming to you with a plane ticket. He’s going to take you to the airport to get you home.”

She hadn’t known where he was, she just called every shelter and hostel for months until she found him.

He went home and, supported and loved by his mother, who had never ceased to know him even though he had forgotten himself, and influenced and inspired by the faith that had sustained his mother’s hope and love, he began attending church services and one day came to my office seeking to be baptized.

He did not find his own way to my office . . . A path, not of his own making, [was] made by the love that found him, that knew him better than he knew himself, and invited him to “follow me.”

Are you, or is someone you know lost in a far-off place? Or are you lost in Church, very near to, but somehow completely apart from the embrace of the master?

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