

The Lost and the Least

September 15, 2013

Luke 15:1-10

Suppose for a moment that you were at a bus stop, and a friend came by and gave you a small bag and said, "I no longer need this, it's yours." You take the bag and get on the bus. When you get off at your next stop, as the bus pulls away you, realize that you left that bag on the bus. You wave at the bus, but its too late. You go on about your business the rest of the day, barely thinking off what was in that bag.

A couple of years later, you run into your friend. Your friend asks you, "so what did you do with the diamond ring I gave you." You say, "you're kidding. What diamond ring are you talking about?" The ring in the bag I gave you 2 years ago was a \$10,000 ring. What did you do with it?

All of sudden you realize that you have lost something very valuable, and there is no way to recover it now. If you had known then, what you know now, you would have tried much harder to find it.

Instead of waving at the bus, you would have run after the bus. If you didn't catch it, you'd try to flag down a ride to catch up with the bus. You'd be calling the bus company to see if they could get in contact with the driver enroute and have him check for the bag. You might have even offered a reward to anyone finding the bag and turning it in.

But no, when you had the opportunity to recover it, you let it slide because you didn't know that something valuable had been lost.

If something is lost who will go looking for it? If I said, "I lost a dollar in the grass out on the lawn today", I doubt that anyone here would rush out there trying to find that dollar." If I said, "I lost a rolled up hundred dollar bill out in the grass and whoever finds it can have it, some of you may not be here for the end of this sermon, because you will feel a 'leading of the Holy Spirit' to go and find that \$100 bill."

The value we place on something we lose will determine how willing we are to go looking for it and how much time and effort we will put into that search.

Now we know that scripture teaches the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, and all who live in it. God has a claim on everybody's life, because they belong to Him. Everybody, and for that matter, everything that is belongs to God. But of all the things God owns in the earth, only one group of items is described by God as being lost.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus is addressing the Pharisees and scribes. He tells his critics two stories - one about a shepherd who lost one of a 100 sheep and one about a woman who lost one of ten coins. Notice right away that the shepherd didn't say, "Oh well, 99 out of a 100 is pretty good." No, he left the 99 and diligently searched for the 1.

The lady who lost the coin, didn't say, "I can make it by on the other nine." No she tore the house up cleaning in every nook and cranny until she found it.

These parables teach us 3 things. The first thing is: God is interested in the least.

Of course, in God's eyes there are no "least." Every person is valuable. Who in our eyes do WE see as the least, the people, not necessarily lost, but looked down upon? Families with kids in trouble with the law, the homeless, garbage collectors, abusive people, the person whose home needs painting? The list could go on and on but you get the idea. We people tend to be very judgmental, even though we profess that we shouldn't do that.

But even if they have tattoos and body piercing, even if they talk different, even if they wear dirty clothes, even if they have no money, even if they have poor grammar and no education, all people are valuable to God.

It is important to understand that the one lost sheep was not more valuable nor was it less valuable than the 99 which were not lost. Imagine the shepherd at the end of the day. As his sheep file by into the fold or pen, he counts them. "95, 96, 97, 98, 99... Hey, one's missing! Where is Snowball? I haven't seen her all afternoon!" He will "leave the 99" and search diligently for "the one which is lost."

Use your imagination a little bit and you can see him backtracking over every place the flock had been that day, down every step of the trail, in every pasture, by every stream on every hillside. Finally, by the light of the moon, he sees something white in the distance. He calls out and the frightened little lamb runs to him.

He doesn't start yelling at Snowball, pointing his finger at it, asking how can a sheep be so dumb as to wander off like that. No, he "lays it on his shoulders" and "rejoicing" returns home. He is so happy that he "calls together his friends and neighbors" for a celebration party. "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!"

Now if the sheep were people, I'd be willing to bet that to many of the others it may have seemed unfair that the shepherd left them in order to search for the one which was lost. After all, they had not wandered away. They had followed the shepherd and listened to him.

You know, sometimes I have heard things said in churches like, "All they talk about is young members, or growth. We are the ones who have been members here all our lives and no one cares about what we think or what we like." Or "They only care about the new people and trying to get outsiders to come. What about us?"

I hope and pray that this will never be the case at St. Paul. Every member is important. But, a couple of points. First, we know that we must grow to survive. And I won't dwell on that this morning.

More to the point of today's message is this: The ones in church are not the ones who are lost. We are already found, we are here, and we should be seeking those who are lost, who are unchurched, who are looking for a church home. To grow, yes. But even more importantly, because that is our command from our Lord

And it does not matter if the lost look different from us, or are a different color and from a different cultural background. It doesn't matter what their station in life may be. God cares for the least, and so must we.

And that brings us to the second thing these parables teach us: God is interested in the lost.

In the culture of Jesus' day, a woman was given a dowry. She received ten silver coins as a wedding gift. Besides the monetary value, these coins held sentimental value, like that of a wedding ring. To lose one would be extremely distressing.

Since women did not carry purses, they would wear their money, usually in a necklace or a head band. The coin which the woman in Jesus' story lost was probably one of these dowry coins that came loose from the chain. It was not of greater value than the other coins, or of any less value.

The thing that made it the center of her attention was that it was lost. In telling this story, Jesus was trying to help those Pharisees and Scribes understand that all people are important to God.

They thought that God hated sinners and was not interested in them. They thought they were more important to God than sinners because they had never wandered away. They thought if someone wandered away, it was their responsibility to find their own way back.

But God cares about lost people, and he searches for them like the woman searched for her coin.

Now, we might understand a God who would forgive sinners who come to him for mercy. But a God who actually searches for sinners and then joyfully forgives them must possess an extraordinary kind of love. This is the kind of love God has for you. If you feel far from God, don't despair – God is searching for you.

The third thing these parables teach us is: God rejoices when the least and lost are found.

When the shepherd finds his sheep, the scripture says, "...he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'

“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

When the woman finds her lost coin, the scripture says, “And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

That lamb had value for the shepherd. That coin had value for the woman. They went looking for their property – seeking it out – because of that value.

Who is going to go looking for God’s property? Only those who put the same value on a person’s soul as God does.

I can’t help but wonder why we as Christians, many of us - and I don’t mean just St. Paul, although I think we certainly fit the description – why many Christians have so much trouble with Evangelism.

I’m sure we would all resent and probably deny the accusation or the implication that we don’t care about God’s people, particularly those who are unchurched or looking for spiritual meaning in life.

But for some reason, the thought of “Evangelism” scares many of us to death, even turns many people off.

We say, “Jesus is Lord.” Then we come face to face with Jesus words in Luke 6:46 – “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say?”

Well, what he says is, “go, make disciples, teach, bring them in.” And I don’t read in scripture where he says, “but only if you want to,” or “but only if you feel like it” or “but only if it won’t inconvenience you.”

No, it’s in the imperative. Make disciples, Jesus says. And we say, “well sure – everybody is welcome at our church and if they come here we will certainly ask them to be a part.

Let’s re-hear that great commission one more time – GO and make disciples.....GO, Jesus says. It isn’t a passive exercise. GO and make disciples. We’ve got to take the initiative.

Now, I’m realistic. I know that many of you, many of our members cannot get out, particularly at night, and go traipsing through neighborhoods, inviting people to our church. Some CAN do that, and we need to take a look at that as a part of our outreach ministry.

But all of us can do something, whether it is physically going, or helping plan, or helping to create program and ideas that will make it easy to invite people to, that will make them want to come, and come back.

We've had some exciting things – our Bible School was really good, I think our Bible Study series can be really good, and I've said it before and I'll say it again – I'm excited, happy and really pleased with the work that Margaret and Gayle and Janice are doing, and those that have helped them.

But Margaret and Gayle and Janice can't do it by themselves, I can't do it by myself, no one or a just a few of us can do it alone. We must all take ownership of our responsibility to our Lord and to his church.

But if we do not value people's souls, we will not go looking for them. And if we will not go looking, then we cannot fulfill our purpose, our calling: which is to bring people into a right relationship with God.

Jesus chose us to be His representatives. Each of us. We need to recognize that we have been given a position as “ticket-master” for Jesus Christ. A ticket-master is someone who sells tickets to sporting events, concerts, museums, train rides, etc. You have to buy a ticket to get in and you do so because you are seeking to be entertained in some way or go somewhere.

“As the Father has sent me, also I send you,” said Jesus. We are the ones with the tickets. If we don't pass out the tickets, the people who are lost cannot take the journey.

And the best thing about our tickets is that they're not for sale. That's right, they're FREE!

Back to the parables in our scripture lesson for a moment. Jesus could have made his point with either of these stories. Why do you think he told both of them, back-to-back?

Partly, I think, because that's what God always does. When God wants us to remember something he repeats himself. When he wants to catch our attention, he says the same thing over and over again, maybe because we, like Jesus' disciples are slow to “get it.”

In addition, these parables are slightly different.

1. The man who has 100 sheep loses 1/100th of his property, and he searches the countryside, till he finds it.
2. The woman with 10 coins loses 1/10th of her possessions and she searches the house, until she can return it to its rightful place.

Each parable tells a story of items that are increasingly more valuable. It's almost as if Jesus is saying: "It doesn't matter how valuable a person may seem to you, God will do whatever is necessary to find that which is lost."

Yes, we must grow the church – as a matter of survival. But I hope you have seen today what God's word tells us about how much God cares about finding the lost. And that is the real issue.

God is constantly searching and seeking to bring the lost into his Kingdom, and he invites – No, he commands - us to join in that search.