

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“Lost and Found”**  
**Luke 15:1-10; Romans 5:6-8**  
**March 19, 2017**

Jesus sure knows how to rub salt in a wound. The Pharisees are all upset here. They are getting really anxious about Jesus’ ministry and his methods. He’s spending way too much time with some pretty bad influences.

And so Jesus decides to tell them a story. In fact three stories:  
a story about a lost sheep,  
a story about a lost coin,  
and a story about a lost son... the prodigal son story comes right after our reading this morning.

If these stories were supposed to calm their anxieties or put Jesus back in their graces, I doubt it worked.

To their ears it sounds as if Jesus just said that God is going to leave them in the dangerous wilderness while he goes off looking for those who never took the time to pay attention to the shepherd in the first place.

Not only that, God’s apparently a whole lot more excited about rescuing the one, than hanging out with the likes of the flock.

A friend of mine said that it reminds him of an episode of *The Office* where Michael Scott, the boss, makes some really awful racial faux pas. So the whole office has to go through sensitivity training... and in the process, Michael gets carried away and is so unaware, that he ends up offending *everyone* even more than he did to begin with.

The Pharisees and the scribes are probably even more frustrated and offended after Jesus tells these stories than they were to begin with. Sometimes you and I think of these stories as nice and sweet inspirational narratives, but I promise you, the religious folks weren’t inspired.

And I’d venture to guess that there are a lot of us listening to these stories today that aren’t *really* all that inspired either. For one thing, chances are you’ve heard this one about a thousand times before. And let’s be honest, it’s easy to get bored with the same old biblical re-runs, isn’t it?

I know at least some of you learned this story in VBS as a kid. At least *then* you got to play games like hide-n-go-seek to go with the story. And you probably made a little sheep out of cotton balls glued to a paper plate. And if that didn’t get you excited, the marshmallow sheep snack at the end of the night did.

So hearing it again... just *read*... with no marshmallows? Well, that’s at least a little disappointing isn’t it?

The other reason I imagine you aren’t all that inspired is that this story doesn’t seem to be about you, or at least not about you today. After all, we’re all here, part of the flock. Whether or not you realize it, you are... part of the 99... if for no other reason than you’re sitting in the pews today singing the hymns, making the best sheep blatting sounds you can. Which means... this sounds an awful lot like a story for someone other than you.

So if you’re not exactly moved by this scripture today,

if the story of some sheep or some coin doesn't do much for you,  
you're in good company.

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So instead of thinking what it's like to be that sheep or that coin, let's look at what this story tells us about God. Because the truth is, most of us still have some upside down ideas about God that we just haven't been able to shake.

Now, I'm not talking about how you would describe God in bible study or Sunday school. I'm not talking about what you'd say you believe about God, but something deeper.

Most of us have an *operative image of God* that often runs counter to what we say we think. It's the image of God that's actually operating in us, that shapes our actions and our emotions when life gets too messy for us to think about our theology.

Have you ever noticed the difference?

How you think you believe one thing, but you act like you believe another?

...especially when you screw up royally?

...or when crisis of some kind hits your life?

On the one hand you tell yourself that you believe God is love and God cares deeply about everyone in this world.

On the other hand, crisis hits and you start making bargains with God, as if you have to convince God to care or to listen. Have you ever done that?

Or maybe you know that God forgives even the worst of sins. Until it's you that needs a taste of God's mercy in a major way, and you're a little less sure.

After all, love has its demands of us, right? And so now things between you and God are a whole lot less certain. You're on shaky ground. In fact, there's a good chance you're more likely to avoid God than seek God.

Despite what you think you believe,

you're likely to start hiding from God rather than reaching out to God.

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Ironically, that's exactly what a sheep lost in the wilderness will do. When a sheep gets lost its natural instinct is to hide. They won't call out or "baa" for the shepherd because fear of their predators paralyzes their voice. Instead, they will lie down and curl up in the brush to hide. Which means that a sheep never helps in its own rescue. All it can do is hide... making its rescue even harder for the shepherd.

We may not be sheep, but most of us know what it's like to hide from time to time... or at least to *avoid* God for a while. We probably wouldn't ever say out loud that God is going to get you, but something deep inside of you isn't all that convinced.

When things in your life get hard or fall apart,

there's part of you that can't help but think maybe God is punishing you

because of *what you did in your past*.

Or God is punishing you because of what *you didn't do*.

In other words, how we operate, our operative image of God is often different from what we say (or even what we think) we believe about God. And that operative image of God has a hold of us in some of the strongest ways.

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Some of you might remember Drew Phillips from the Christian Activity Center in East St. Louis. We had Drew here several years ago. You might remember he was a chaplain there, and so he spent a lot of time with kids and with families there in East St. Louis.

I remember one time he told me about one of the kids that had grown up in their ministry and had done really well. Unlike the majority of kids in East St. Louis, this guy actually graduated from high school. And even more impressive, was that he went off to college.

But the reality was, he couldn't afford it. So after a semester or two he had to come back home, broke and in debt, and with no degree to show for it. And back in East St. Louis he, of course, couldn't find a job. It didn't matter what he tried.

Eventually he got pretty desperate. He needed some money. So he did some things he knew he shouldn't, something illegal to make some quick cash. After all, that's what desperation does to us.

In the process he was pulled over and arrested and thrown in jail, where he still was when Drew was telling me about this kid.

And of course the jails over there are completely over crowded. The place he was in only has the capacity for 350 inmates, but there were 600 inmates being kept in that facility.

So this student of Drew's was sleeping on the floor. And the food there was awful. And the whole experience was really bad.

Drew went to visit him and he told Drew, "This is not who I am. I'm not hard like the guys here... but I know God is punishing me for what I did."

And Drew looked at him and said "This isn't Jesus' will for you. Jesus came to set the captives free." And he wanted to say, "God is not punishing you. The truth is God was the first one broken hearted when you were pulled over and arrested."

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That's the kind of shift I'm talking about. It's a shift on the deepest level, and a needed one at that. God is not out to make you pay for what you did... or didn't do, at least not if God is anything like Jesus.

Sure God's love makes demands of us. Sure there are consequences for our actions. But when life starts falling apart, or you end up reaping what you've sown, ***don't for a minute think God is somewhere gloating over the fact that you're learning a lesson or getting what you deserved.***

That's not what God is like.

Yes God is after you... but not to whip you back in shape.

And if you're a coin that's somehow gotten itself quite lost...

God is going to get you. In fact, God may even turn the room of your life upside down to get you... but not to punish you.

If you start to feel paranoid like God is haunting you and he won't leave you alone then you're probably right, God is haunting you. But the thing is, God is doing that to pick you up and carry you back home.

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Anne Lamott writes about her own experience of God's holy haunting. In fact, if you read her story then you learn that her life was a mess. She grew up a kind of agnostic skeptic and ended up addicted to cocaine and alcohol.

She had been for a long time. And she had just gone through an abortion of a child that she conceived in an affair with a married man. In the week after the abortion, she took to bed with alcohol and pain medication... lost in the darkest pit of despair... teetering on life and death.

She writes about that week:<sup>1</sup>

*“After a while, as I lay there [in this semi-conscious haze], I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course, there wasn’t. But after a while, in the **dark** again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.*

*And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing **that simply could not be allowed to happen**. I turned to the wall and said out loud, ‘I would rather die.’*

*I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I clenched my eyes shut, but that didn’t help because that’s not what I was seeing him with.*

*Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.*

*“This experience spooked me badly,” she writes “but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in.*

*But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my house door when I entered or left.*

*One week later, [I stumbled into a random church and sat in the back]. I was so hung over that I couldn’t stand up for the songs. [When I listened to the sermon I thought it] was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials,*

*but **the last song** was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.*

*... I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God’s own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head. I [cussed out loud saying, ‘Fine! I quit.’] I took a long deep breath and said out loud, ‘All right. You can come in.’*

*So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.”*

God is sometimes like a cat nipping at your heels...

sometimes like a reckless shepherd who’s willing to leave the 99...

sometimes like a crazed woman who will rip up her carpet to find what is rightfully hers... that is... **to find you.**

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, 49-50.

The Pharisees and religious folks listening to Jesus' stories, those that know the scripture all too well, and those that do everything right... what they don't realize is that these stories are ultimately about them.

Did you ever notice that Jesus is talking to them? He directs the parables **to them**... not the sinners and tax collectors. In fact, you might say that those religious folks are even more lost than the sinners and tax collectors Jesus was hanging out with, ***if for no other reason than they have no idea how lost they really are.***

You may not be tripping out on drugs or falling over drunk, but as far as God is concerned, it really doesn't make much difference. Because you can get even more lost in your smug self-confidence, or your stubborn independence, or your skeptical rationalism, or your perfect moralism.

Even when we've already been found a time or two... there's a good chance you'll need finding again... and again. After all, if we're anything like sheep, we're probably more apt to follow our appetites and get ourselves lost all over again than we are to keep our ears and eyes always fixed on the shepherd, always following.

Which I imagine is exactly why Jesus tells these stories not to the sinners and tax collectors, but to the religious. It's really for them.

So whether you think you have all your ducks in a row  
or you're embarrassed that you don't.

Whether you consider yourself a success  
or a failure.

Whether your life is comfortable  
or chaotic...

Whether you're confident about the future  
or full of uncertainty...

Know this: ***God is after you... today and everyday... no matter where you roam.***

And despite what you think, every time God gets ahold of you, there's not going to be some scolding or punishing. That's not what God does. But there is going to be a party. A great big one because more than anything, God wants to celebrate over you.

"Rejoice with me," the shepherd says. "I've found my lost sheep."

"Rejoice with me," the woman says. "I've found my lost coin."

The prophets said it too. Zephaniah wrote that in that day, "the Lord your God... will rejoice over you with singing." (3:17)

This is who God is. So believe the good news.

You are beloved by God. You are sought after by God.

And it is you that God longs to celebrate.

Amen.

Silent Reflection:

*"Self-righteousness in large part consists in a denial of our lostness. We are as lost as any wandering sheep, as any dropped coin, as any prodigal son. For as long as we hold on to any pretense of having it all together we are prevented from deepening and maturing in the Christian faith."*  
(E. Peterson "Tell It Slant" 98)