

“Lost, But Not Least”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – September 11, 2022

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 it's too late. You go on about your business the rest of the day, barely thinking of 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 of 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 en route 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 quarter in the grass out on the lawn today," I guarantee you that some of the kids will be out there trying to find that quarter. 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 the thing which was lost will determine who is willing to go looking for it and how much time and effort will be put into that search.

God has a claim on everybody's life because they belong to Him. It does not matter how old we are, how smart we are, what color we are, how bad we are, how tough we are, how cool we are, how sick we are, how messed up we are or anything else. We are property belonging to God. Every cow, cat, aardvark, whale, hawk, and all other animals belong to God. Every piece of gold, silver, diamond, and any other kind of wealth belongs to God. Every building belongs to God. Everybody that you see 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 passage today, Jesus is addressing the Pharisees and scribes. He tells his critics two stories. One about a shepherd who lost one of 100 sheep and one about a woman who lost one of ten coins. The shepherd didn't say, "Oh well, 99 out of a 100 is a pretty good average to me." No, the shepherd left the 99 and diligently searched for the one.

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 stories teach us three things.

The first thing that these parables teach us 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, not necessarily lost, but looked down upon? Families with kids in trouble with the law, divorced people, alcoholics, the homeless, tax collectors, garbage collectors, abusive people, the person who comes for free food, the person whose home needs painting? The list could go on & on, but you get the idea. Even if they have tattoos and body piercings, even if they talk differently, even if they wear dirty clothes, even if they have no money, even if they have poor grammar and no education, they are valuable to God. It is important to understand that the lost sheep was not more valuable nor was it less valuable than the ones 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." I imagine 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 a sheep can 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 to the other sheep 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.

Sometimes I have heard things said in churches like, "All they care about is the young people. 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?" The point is: the ones in church are not the ones who are lost. They are already found and should be seeking those who are lost. And it does not matter if the lost look different from us or are a different color and from a different cultural background. It does not matter if they don't dress like us.

Secondly, these parables teach us that: God is interested in the lost. In the culture of Jesus' day, a woman was given a dowry. Since women did not carry purses, they would wear their money—usually in a necklace or a head band. The coin which this woman 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 & 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. Tell me this: how can a coin find its way back? But God cares about lost people, and he searches for them like the woman searched for her coin.

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, "**WHEN HE FINDS IT, 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." (Luke 15:5-7) 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." (Luke 15:9-10)

Who is going to go looking for God's property? Only those who put the same premium on a person's soul as God does. You see, most people have no idea of how valuable their soul is or that their soul is even lost. They treat their souls the same way as the person who left the bag with the diamond ring in it on the bus. They do not have a clue that their soul is going to live forever, and unfortunately that forever is going to be spent alienated from God.

We know that if some of our family & friends were to die today, they would wake up separated from God because we never told them how they could be found. "My friend is fun to be with and he makes me laugh." The truth is, he is lost. "That lady at the store is really mean." The truth is, she is lost. "Grandpa has some good stories." The truth is, he is lost. "The neighbor keeps her flower garden spotless." The truth is, she is lost. "Our co-workers have been on the job for 5 years." The truth is, they are lost.

In some instances, we never attempted to tell them about Jesus. When we say, "we love and we care," it has to include loving and caring about souls. We can't just "love and care" for their physical well-being, but we must "love and care" for their spiritual well-being, too. 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, which is to bring people into a right relationship with God. And if we will not fulfill our purpose, then what good are we to God.

Each one of us is more important in the eyes of God than we think we are. God placed you in your family, because He intended to use you to impact people in your family. He placed you on your job, because that's part of his strategy to

find lost souls at that company. He placed you in your school; because there are souls there you can reach for Him if you want to do it.

All believers (the 99 sheep) are ticket-masters, whether we accept the commission or not. *“AS THE FATHER HAS SENT ME, ALSO I SEND YOU,”* said Jesus. We are the only 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! Plus, we have been given an unlimited supply and we will never be “sold out.” And how wonderful it will be when you get to heaven and hear those formerly lost say to you, "if you had not given me this ticket, I might not be here today."

Amen.