

God's Love

By John Ulrich, Lead Pastor

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Luke 15:1-32

I read from the gospel of Luke the Parable of the Lost Sheep:

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And 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 15:1-7

A few years ago I lost my cat. He was a yellow tabby named Figaro. Now I know what some of you, especially guys, are thinking. You're thinking "I don't know what comparison you're making here Ulrich, but around my house the party would not start when the cat was found. It would start when the cat was lost." I have to say Figaro wasn't just any cat. He was the perfect mixture. Ladies, you would have loved Figaro because he was very affectionate. He used to sit in the pocket of Kelley's apron while she cooked in the kitchen.

Guys, you would have liked him because if there was ever a man's cat it was Figaro. He was a great hunter: He killed mice and rats. And snakes! One time in Africa he got bitten by a poisonous snake and swelled up twice his normal size and lost a bunch of hair, but he lived. He didn't take garbage off anyone. He one time chased the neighbor's dog out of our yard and across the street into their yard and onto their front porch and then he laid down and gave himself a bath right in front of the dog. He was like "bring it Fluffy." He was a great cat! He was like half-dog. He would walk around the block with us.

We loved that cat. We loved him so much we brought him back from Zimbabwe with us. But one day early in November before Thanksgiving we lost him. It took us a day or two to realize it, but he wasn't around. We tried to find him. We walked around and called for him. We drove around and looked for him. We asked our neighbors if they had seen him, but we couldn't find him. This went on, not just for days but for weeks

Eventually, one by one our family gave up on Figaro. But not Calvin. He just wouldn't give up. He had this teacher who made it worse. She kept telling him about how her dog was lost and they found it after three weeks, and she would pray with him about it. He just spent weeks looking out the window and praying for his cat to come home.

By the time we got to Christmas, we knew it was over. It was a really hard winter in Kansas, and we'd had a big snow already. So we had to accept the fact that we had lost Figaro for good. I know that some of you here have lost pets that you really, really loved. You can appreciate how hard it was for Calvin to lose that animal that he cared so much about.

In today's passage in the parable Kelley just read, Jesus tells us the story of a Shepherd who lost a sheep. This was not a rich shepherd. A large flock was 300 sheep. This shepherd has only 100. Like any shepherd, every night he would have counted his sheep. He would know every sheep in his flock by name and appearance. When he found that one was missing, he did what any shepherd would do. He left the 99, probably in the care of a helper, and went looking for the lost sheep. That Shepherd is going to look and look. He'll look until he finds that the sheep has been stolen or finds the remains where the wolves have gotten it or until he finds the sheep itself. Because this sheep was of great value to him, it was precious. It was part of his flock

And sure enough, Jesus tells us that the shepherd finds his sheep! When he finds it, he does what any shepherd would do. He rejoices! He doesn't yell at the sheep. He doesn't storm off and leave the sheep to follow him as best it can. He doesn't put a rope around its neck and drag it home. He picks it up puts it on his shoulders and carries it home, rejoicing.

He doesn't just rejoice alone! He goes to his neighbors, who he is glad to discover are not thieves, and to his friends. He gathers them together probably for a meal, and they celebrate together! They rejoice!

Jesus tells us that this is how God feels when a sinner turns to him. He's not saying here that God doesn't care about the 99. The Pharisees considered themselves to be the 99, and Jesus isn't disputing that with them right now. He is simply making the point that when a tax collector or prostitute or thief or drunkard or Pharisee turns to God for forgiveness, God feels about that person the way the Shepherd felt about this sheep.

I think that must have been the same feeling Calvin had when two days after Christmas, six weeks after Figaro disappeared, he looked out the window one more time, and I heard him scream "Figaro." He ran outside in the bitter cold of a Kansas winter, running on the snow and ice in his bare feet. Figaro was dirty, and weak, and he had lost a lot of weight. He barely had enough strength to stand. Calvin ran to him, picked him up, and wrapped him in a blanket. There was a party at our house that night! We fed Figaro the best food we could. We put him on the softest blanket, and we didn't let him out of our sight for weeks.

Now Can you think about my son? Can you think about how happy he was when he found his pet? How all the weeks of waiting by the window, and all the prayers, and all the hope was worth it in that moment? Can you think about the joy he felt when he saw that old cat? And that's just a cat.

What Jesus wants you to know from this parable is this: The way we felt when we found Figaro, the way the shepherd felt when he found his sheep is the way God feels when a sinner comes

to him for forgiveness. If you have come to Jesus for forgiveness, that's the way he feels about you. God Loves You. I read again from the gospel of Luke the parable of the lost coin:

“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 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 15:8-10

My friend's Grandmother, whose name was Esther, lost her ring. We don't know exactly when it happened, but at some point she lost her ring. Ladies, I have to tell you this wasn't just any ring. This was a gold solitaire with a Tiffany diamond, a 3K Tiffany diamond. Esther had never had anything but a plain, gold wedding band. After they had been married for years and years, for years and years, far more years than we have, dear Esther's husband, who was a Presbyterian minister, gave Esther her first diamond ring. So this was a valuable ring not just because of its street value, but because it was sentimental. It was a family heirloom.

And it got lost. One day Esther's daughter showed up to take her to lunch, and Esther said "Honey, I've lost my ring." So they searched and searched and searched. The daughter told me they looked everywhere. They crawled around on hands and knees and looked on the floor. They looked in the cracks of the sofa. They moved the furniture. They went through the washer and dryer. They checked the drains. They took the sheets off the bed. They tried the trash, the vacuum bag. They even went through the ice-maker in the refrigerator, trying to figure out where this ring could possibly be. Finally after days and weeks of intense searching, they gave up. They couldn't find the 3K Tiffany diamond family heirloom.

If you've ever broken a piece of great grandma's china, lost a family heirloom in a fire or flood, or misplaced your wedding ring, you probably know the feeling of losing something valuable. In the next parable, Luke follows up his story about a man who lost his sheep with a story about a woman who lost something. Now, it's normal for Luke to do this when he gives us the perspective of one gender on something, he often follows it with the other. In the Christmas story, we get the perspective of Zacharias and Elisabeth, of Mary and Joseph, of Simeon and Anna. So it makes sense that Jesus would follow the parable of the lost sheep with the story of something lost and found from a woman's perspective.

In this story, what the woman has lost is a coin. The coin was a drachma, about a day's wage for a common laborer. Not valuable if you are rich, but notice that whereas the man had 100 sheep the woman has only 10 coins. It was a greater proportion of her wealth. And because Jesus mentions 10 coins, many scholars have concluded that this is a part of her dowry, given to her on her wedding day and sewn onto a headdress she would keep in a special place. This dowry was hers, forever, even if her husband divorced her. So even though it's not worth much to a rich person, it was of great value to her. It was her only heirloom. It had both intrinsic value and sentimental value.

So when she loses it she does what the Shepherd does. She searches for it. She lights a lamp, so she can see in the dark corners of her house. She cleans her house, just like Kelley tries to get me to do every time I lose something. "I lost my favorite fishing lure. Try emptying the dishwasher." The woman searches diligently until she finds it.

When she finds it, like the shepherd, she rejoices. She does it publicly. She doesn't just bump into her friends and neighbors. She calls them together for a meal and she says "Rejoice with me! I've found the piece of my dowry that I was looking for!"

She probably feels like Esther did when months and months later she finally found the ring! Esther celebrated! Her daughter celebrated! Her whole family celebrated! Then they locked that baby up in a safe where it sits to this day, because it was precious to them! It was a treasured family heirloom. And that's just a rock

What Jesus wants us to know from this parable is this: The way Esther felt when she found that ring the way the lady felt when he found her coin is the way God feels when a sinner comes to him for forgiveness. If you have come to Jesus for forgiveness, that's the way he feels about you. God Loves You. I read again from Luke's gospel the Parable of the Lost Son:

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my

friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!

“ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ ”

- Luke 15:11-32

I had some friends who lost a child. This was Len and Judy Everswick, missionaries to Zimbabwe. Len is brother to Doug Everswick, who spoke at our church last year. Len and Judy had been way out in the rural areas of Zimbabwe doing ministry during the time of year that is the beginning of the rains. They had a good time of ministry, but to return to the city they had to cross a river. When they got to the river, they found that a flash flood had occurred. The rains had swollen the stream, and the muddy water was washing over the bridge. It wasn't safe to cross, so they decided to wait. They started a fire to fix some tea. While they waited, Len was passing the time by playing a game of fetch with their dog. Len would throw a big stick in the river, and their dog Lance would jump in and fetch the stick and swim back against the current.

After a while, Len went to tend the fire. While he was doing that, his three year old daughter, Kim, started throwing the stick instead. At one point she threw the stick into the river and the dog didn't fetch it, so she reached over to grab it herself and their little girl fell down the bank, and into that swollen river. Len saw what happened out of the corner of his eye. He ran to the river, and he would have jumped in to save her but he couldn't see her. The water was red with the mud that had washed into the river. The current was swirling this way and that. The current was so strong that he knew she would not be able to fight it not for a minute. He knew that in no time she would wash over the bridge and be caught in the under-tow and lost forever.

He was frantic and ready to do anything, whatever it took to rescue his daughter. But he couldn't see her. All he could see was the muddy water swirling in front of him. He had never felt such helplessness and never prayed so hard. He had lost his child.

Some of you know how painful it is to lose a child, to stillbirth, to illness, to violence, to addiction, to rebellion. You know what it is to ache for that child to long for them, to know that you would do anything if you could get that child back.

Jesus finishes these “parables of the lost” by telling us about a father who lost something that really was of greatest value to him. Because this time, it wasn't 1/100 or 1/10 it was ½. It wasn't a sheep or a coin this time. It was a son.

I know that most of you have heard this parable before. Maybe you've even studied it. Today I don't want you to analyze it so much as I want you to feel it. Jesus gave us this truth in a story, because he wants us to feel it. Let me just ask: Can you feel the heart of God in this story? Can you feel the pride and disdain of the younger son, as he demands the resources his Father had accumulated for him? Can you feel his arrogance as he tells his father “I can do this better on my own. I'm not interested in you and your plans. Just give me the stuff.” Can you feel his self-

sufficiency, as he goes to a far-off country and lives large with lots of friends, and girls, and stuff? Can you feel his confusion as all this evaporates right before his eyes, and a famine starts? Can you feel his shame as he finds himself in the lowest position any Jew could ever imagine, working for a gentile, serving pigs and longing to fill his belly with the pods they ate?

Can you feel his anxiety as he staggers off down the dusty road to his Father's house? Can you hear him practicing his speech? "I've sinned against heaven and against you. I'm not asking to be a son. I'm not asking to be a servant. I'm not even asking to be a slave. I'm just asking if maybe I could be a day laborer that you hire from time to time to work in your fields so that I could live, and not die." Can you feel that in this story?

Can you feel the compassion of the Father as he looks down that road for the hundred-thousandth time and, far off in the distance, sees someone who looks like his son, and throws down what he's doing, and runs like no self-respecting middle eastern Father would run to meet his son, and falls on his neck and kisses him, and doesn't even let him finish his speech before he's shouting orders, because he's been longing for this day for years? He tells them to put the best robe on him, to get sandals for his feet, to get a family ring for him, and fix the biggest feast they've ever had, because his son was dead and is alive again. He's lost and now he's found! Can you feel the Father's joy at that moment? Joy that is so big and so powerful that nothing can stop it, not even the withering disapproval of a self-righteous older son. Can you think about how the Father felt at that moment?

He must have felt the same way as my friend Len, who had lost his daughter. When in his panic just when he thought all was lost and was preparing to run downstream, he saw the faintest glimmer of blond hair under that muddy water circling one more time in an eddy before it went over the bridge. He jumped into the river and pulled out his daughter, and hugged her to his chest and rocked back and forth with her, and said thanks to God and had a little party in his heart right there!

I want you this morning not so much to analyze the details of these parables but to feel that feeling, because Jesus is telling us something important here today. The way that the father felt when he saw the prodigal, the way Len felt when he grabbed his daughter is the way God feels when a sinner comes to him for forgiveness. I you have come to the Father for forgiveness because of what Jesus did for you on the cross, that's the way he feels about you right now! God Loves you!

Jesus tells us the same story in three different ways, because it's important that we understand this. The Pharisees had a problem. They were unable to rejoice in the forgiveness of other people. When Jesus went to these people, all they could see were sinners and tax collectors. When he talked to them, they said "Why is he making himself unclean?" When he pronounced them forgiven, they said "Who does he think he is?" When he ate with them, they called him a drunkard and a glutton.

So Jesus tells three parables that show the heart of the Father, that let us step into the Father's love for people and his openness toward them and his joy when they turn to him for forgiveness. Jesus invites the Pharisees to join him in receiving God's love and joyfully reflecting it to others. Today I want to join Jesus in asking you to do those two things:

First, I want you to receive God's Love. This Sunday in our Advent cycle is a day that we celebrate the Love of God as seen in the coming of Jesus. It's the love of a shepherd for a valued sheep, the love of a common woman for a family heirloom, the love of a Father for a wayward son.

In Advent, we recognize the fact with reverential awe that God didn't just do what the characters in these parables did. He didn't just take a walk to look for us. He didn't just light a lamp to check the corners. He didn't just stand on the porch longing and waiting. God himself, the second person of the Trinity, took on human flesh and human limitations and human pain. He took on unjust accusations and the brokenness, the cursedness of this world and ultimately, he took on my sin and your sin as he hung on the Cross of Calvary.

God, the Son, came for all people no matter what we've done. God, the Son, came for all nations, for America and Mexico, for Guatemala and Honduras, for South Africa, for Nigeria and the Philippines for Zimbabwe and Papua. No matter who you are God Loves You. Jesus came to seek and to save You.

I want so badly for each and every one of you to experience that moment in these parables of being found by God. I want you to recognize your lostness. I want you to know what it is to give it your all and fail, to come to the Father broken, and stripped bare, and empty handed, to say "God, you have placed incredible resources in my life and instead of being what you want me to be I've said 'give me what's coming to me I want to do this my way'. I've come to realize that I'm not enough, that you are the only one who has what I need. I have no more wealth, no more thoughts about what I deserve, no more claims about my cleverness. Could I please just quietly serve you? I want you to know your lostness.

I want you to know more. I want you to know what it is to have the Father run to you and interrupt your little speech and fall on your neck and hug you, and say "Bring the best robe, and the slippers, and the ring he's not a slave he's my son. She's not a day-laborer she's my daughter." I want to see the party start in your heart. I want you to know what it is to receive God's love no matter who you are or what you've done. That's the first thing.

If you're here today and you've never had that feeling of being found by God, today is the perfect day. Even if you've been going to church for years, you could receive God's love for the first time today. In a minute, I'm going to pray a prayer and you can join me in that prayer.

There's a second thing I want us to do with these parables today. This day in our Advent cycle is also a day that we think about joyfully sharing the Love of God that we have received in the coming of Jesus. I want you to share that love that you have received from God with others.

I want you to share the Love of God with those around you. I want you to share the heart of the Father in seeking for those who are lost. I want you to choose right now to join Jesus in being the physical representation of the love of the Father. I want you to ask yourself "How, during this Advent season, can I show people the love of God?"

I want you to pray right now for God to show you someone in your life that you can invite to our Christmas Eve service here at Perry Creek, someone you can invite to receive and rejoice in the Love of God. There's not a better time for people to receive that than Christmas.

Lifeway Research did a big survey relating to Christmas and faith. They found something interesting. We think that most of the people we see on the street have made up their mind about Christ and Christmas, but they haven't. 40% of the people they surveyed, and it was a sizeable survey, said they were not planning on attending church at all during this Christmas Season. That may not be a big surprise. But of the people that are not planning to attend church, 57% said they would go if someone would just ask them.

That's amazing! People are far more open to finding the love of God in this season than we think. Who in your life can you invite to hear the message that God loves them, that Jesus came for them? Who is the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son or daughter that you can find for the Father? Will you pray and ask God to show you? Will you obey him when he does?

Advent is a time when we see that God really loves all kinds of people from all countries, a time when we have joy over that love. Jesus is truly a Savior for all nations.