

Luke 15 – God Loves Lost People

Sign Title: God Loves Lost People

May 9, 2010

I would like to welcome you to Faith Evangelical Free Church. Today we are between series. We just finished up a study of the book of Hebrews and two weeks from today we begin our summer study on heaven. I want to use today to talk about something very close to God's heart. Because it is close to God's heart, as your pastor, I want it close to ours.

This morning we are looking at Luke 15. The 15th chapter of Luke's gospel is the heart of Luke's gospel. Here, in the center of Luke, God inspired Luke to show a scene from Jesus' life that teaches us with unprecedented clarity about God's love and mercy for lost people tangled in their own web of sin.

Before we look at Luke 15, I want to set the context. Jesus was hang'in with the wrong crowd. He was eating with a group called the tax collectors and sinners. He was hanging out in the local bar and even going over to a sinners house to watch Monday night football. This was not going over well with the religious establishment. Luke 15:2, says the Pharisees and Scribes were *grumbling* about Jesus' choice of friends. In the Greek, the tense of the word *grumble* tells us this wasn't a one time occurrence, these guys just couldn't stop bad mouthing Jesus. They were really irritated about it and they kept talking about it.

If you have been around church at all, you know it is easy to bash the Pharisees and Scribes when you are studying Jesus. They are the bad guys, Jesus and the disciples are the good guys. But before we discredit the Scribes

and Pharisees on this one, we need to understand more about the tax collectors and sinners Jesus hung out with. I think we would sympathize with the religious establishment more than we realize.

Tax collectors were hated. They were Jews who sold out to the Romans for the right to collect taxes from their own people, plus whatever they tacked on for their handling costs. They were viewed as having committed treason against their own people. It is the same feeling we had this week when we heard of someone working for Al-Qaeda trying to bomb Times Square. Let the traitors against our country have it.

Tax collectors were so despised they were not even allowed to give an offering in the temple. You know it is serious when they won't let you give in the offering plate! Their testimony was not allowed in Jewish courts because they were considered liars. The Jews considered them to be worst of society with the shadiest of character. These are the people Jesus is having lunch appointments with. Jesus wants a big lunch crowd so he also invited the local sinners to eat with him and the tax collectors. Sinners are the people who are the morally reprehensible in society, people like prostitutes and drug dealers. Jesus had very strategic lunch appointments. He ate with people who desperately needed to be saved.

While the respectable religious people were grumbling about Jesus' proclivity to enjoy the lowering echelons of society, Jesus took the opportunity to show them the heart of the God they didn't understand. He does it with a very unique parable. It is a single parable that involves three stories. The story of the

lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. Jesus uses the three stories with one theme to blast deeper and deeper into the granite of their heart and ours. Each story drives the same truth deeper and deeper into their hearts and ours. *God loves lost people.*

This morning, I want to let these stories do their work in our heart by retelling them with a slightly modern flare. As I retell them, don't just hear them, listen to them and let them work this one truth deeper and deeper in your heart. *God loves lost people.*

The Lost Sheep - *(Don't show slide till indicated later in this point.)*

A shepherd lost a sheep. Apparently he was a wealthy shepherd, he had a hundred in his flock. It is quite an operation to manage that number of sheep. Sheep are not known for their intelligence. They begin grazing in a direction and before they know it, they have wandered from the flock and sometimes they don't even know where they are or how to find their way home. To lose a sheep is not an uncommon thing. It happened all the time in the ancient world. On paper, it wasn't much of a loss, only 1%. What's the difference between 99% or 100% on a test? You still get an A+. But while the loss didn't look bad for the shepherd's accounting book, this shepherd looking at accounting, graphs and number, he cared about the sheep. A sheep was defenseless and left alone it wouldn't be long until wild animals had a tasty dinner.

The shepherd left the 99 in the open country to fend for themselves while he looked for the lost sheep. Why did he do this? Because the shepherd cared about the life of his sheep. The shepherd loved all of his sheep. Nobody in his

flock was just a number. Every sheep is worth going out in the cold of the night to look for.

This morning, I don't know where you are at with God. There are a lot of people in church and it is easy to be lost in the crowd and wonder if anybody knows you, if anybody cares about you. Let's be honest. It is easy for people be lost in the numbers at church, in the corporate office and at school. But God doesn't have his eyes on the number, God cares about you. If this morning, you are lost from God, he is seeking you. Make no mistake, God loves and is seeking you.

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Look how the shepherd reacts when he finds the sheep. He doesn't kick him and say, "Dumb lamb, why can't you stick with the group?" He picks him up on his shoulders and *carries* him home rejoicing. The lost sheep, is found! He is so excited he can't wait to tell someone when he gets home. In fact, he calls his neighbors together and says, this is something to celebrate. The sheep I thought we lost, I found him and he is back!

Doesn't this sound strange? A shepherd who is well off, he has 99 other sheep, but he throws a party when one lost sheep is found. Most of us would throw him back in with the other sheep and get back to business, but that is not the shepherds heart. The shepherd has much more joy in the saving of one sheep who is lost than enjoying the ninety-nine who are safe.

Then Jesus applies this to them and us.

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. Luke 15:7

You know what really excites God? Do you know what makes God throw a party? One lost sinner who repents. Joy in God's heart doesn't come from the size of the saved but the saving of the lost. *God loves lost people.*

The Lost Coin - *(Don't show slide till indicated later in this point.)*

Before the impact of that story could dissipate, Jesus ropes their attention into another one. Instead of a shepherd and a hundred sheep, it involves a woman and ten coins. In the Greek, the coins are drauchmas. One drauchma is the equivalent of a days wage for a laborer. So instead of a wealthy shepherd we have a poor woman. She lost a tenth of her money. This coin wasn't something she could afford to lose. That kind of money isn't important to some people, but to her, it was extremely valuable.

Traditional homes at this time were dark because they didn't have windows and some of the poor used straw to soften a dirt floor. Finding the coin in a house like that wouldn't be easy. It would be dark with plenty of places with straw to sift through. But it was worth looking for. The coin was valuable to her. I picture her with a dim oil lamp on the floor looking through everything. The text says she sought the coin diligently until she found it. The word diligently means she wasn't going to give up until she found it. She was going to move every piece of furniture, pick up every piece of straw and search on her hands and knees until she found it. That coin was extremely valuable.

When she found it, she had an unusual reaction, she grabbed her friends and neighbors to have a party. I don't think most of us would have a party over finding what we lost because of our own incompetence, but she does! That coin

was so important to her, finding it was like winning the lottery. She couldn't help but celebrate.

Jesus applies this story by saying, just as this woman celebrated when her lost coin was found because it was so valuable to her, there is a party in heaven over one sinner who repents because sinners are valuable to me.

Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Luke 15:10

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Why does God throw a party in heaven for just one repenting sinner? *God loves lost people.* They are valuable and worth looking for. While the Pharisees and Scribes thought the tax collectors and sinners had no value, to God they have immense value.

The Lost Son - *(Don't show slide till indicated later in this point.)*

A lost sheep, a lost coin, and without missing a heartbeat, a lost son. The story begins with a young man who wanted a break from the nest. Like thousands before and after, he had his reasons. He wanted to be his own man and live his own life. He was tired of the constant harping he felt at home. *“Take out the garbage! Clean up your room! Put the cap on the toothpaste!”* He longed to get out from under the thumb of his parents. Life at home was so claustrophobic. This is a familiar script played out in countless families as a young man assert their independence at home.

One day, in the heat of a regular argument, the younger son threw down the gauntlet and spoke his mind, *“Give me my share of the inheritance and I am out of here!”* In Jewish culture the older son received 2/3rd of the inheritance, the

younger son, 1/3rd. When the younger son asked for his share of the inheritance, he was essentially telling his father he wished he was dead. He would rather have his father's money than have his father. Those have to be some of the most hurtful words a son can say to a father.

This father knew further arguing was useless. There was nothing more he could do to convince his son of his love or calm his spirit. Amazingly, the father granted this outrageous request. He sold a third of everything he owned and gave the money to the son who cursed his life and wished for his death.

When 33% of the business was liquidated, the son finally had what he wanted. Cash in hand, he moved to a distant country where he could finally be his own boss. Soon he sported a Rolex watch, Abercrombie and Fitch clothing, fancy leather boots and was dining out every night. No doubt, he bought himself a pimped out car with shiny rims, tinted windows and a big sub-woofer that could shake the entire block. He lived in a fancy condo with soft leather furniture and a big screen TV.

As for friends and popularity, he had it. Even he was surprised by how many people liked his style and how the women adored him. This was the kind of life he wanted. He could do anything; he could buy anything. He was free and he was popular.

I am sure that with this life-style came a hunger for new pleasures and deeper levels of depravity. It wasn't long until the numbers in the checking account were dwindling fast. But why worry when you are having such a good time.

Then came the famine. His resources were gone and the local economy was in the pot. The friends who sought him, now snubbed him. The only job he could find was working for a gentile pig farmer. The text says he literally *glued* himself to the farmer. In other words, his only source of hope was that farmer. That didn't mean he wasn't well paid. He was a day laborer. The lowest class and lowest paid of workers. I am sure Jesus' audience winced when Jesus said he worked for a *pig farmer*. Pigs are unclean animals and for a good Jewish boy to work for a gentile pig farmer; that was an act of utter desperation.

Feeding pigs didn't provide enough to live on. He was so hungry when he was feeding the pigs that he wanted to eat the woody pods the pigs were eating. Not much else on the farm would eat those pods, but being the garbage disposals they are, pigs will eat them. His life had sunk so low he wished he could eat them too. A few months before, he was mister popularity, but now the pigs were eating better than he was!

It is amazing how hard times get our attention and clear our thinking. He had tried to forget his life at home, but there was one thing he couldn't forget and would always remember, that was his father's love.

Even his father's lowest servants were better off than he was. It would be better to be a servant for a loving father than wish you could eat with the pigs. Maybe it was better off at home after all. He was dying, it was worth a try.

What this son could not understand is the depth of a father's love. Everything about this son was burnt into his father's conscience by love. Every feature of his dear son's face, dad treasured in his memory and wept over in his

absence. Every day his father's eyes scanned the road to the horizon, hoping and wishing his lost son would return. One sentence tells the story.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. Luke 15:20

Though he was covered in rags, there was something familiar about the boy the father saw coming toward him on the horizon. Maybe it was his posture or the bounce in his step. Something gave away his son's identity while he was still in the distance. The Bible says, the moment he recognized his lost son he was "filled with compassion." He was literally overcome with a flood of emotion. The tears swelled up in his eyes, he was sobbing, weeping with tears of joy. He could barely get his breath. He did a very undignified thing for a man of his age and stature. He ran to his son. That means he pulled up his robe, tucking it in his belt and he ran. In that culture, it was unheard of for a man of his stature to run or to expose his legs. For us it would be like he was in the bathroom in his underwear when he saw his son and he was so overcome with emotion that he didn't stop to get dressed but ran into the driveway with nothing but his underwear on so he could hug him. It doesn't say he hugged him and kissed him once. The tense of the Greek tells us he did this repeatedly. He showered affection over him as the tears rolled down his cheeks.

While being hugged and kissed the son started his well rehearsed speech. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Before he could say any more, his father cut him off mid-sentence. "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger

and sandals on his feet. Kill the fattened calf that we were saving for a big party. My son was lost and he is found. He was dead and he is alive!"

What an incredibly loving father. He loved his son enough to let him go but he never gave up loving him and seeking his return. C G Montefiore, a Jewish New Testament scholar, said what makes Luke 15 so incredible is that while the rabbis agreed God would welcome a repentant sinner. Luke 15 tells us God is seeking sinners. He is longing for them to turn to him and when they come home, he runs to meet them. The love God has for lost sinners wasn't even on the radar screens of peoples minds in the ancient world. What Luke 15 teaches us is completely revolutionary.

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God loves lost people. He doesn't give up on them but he loves them and is seeking their return.

This morning, is God's seeking, passionate love revolutionary for you? If you don't know Christ this morning and your life is a mess, you need to know God is seeking you, God loves you. Your life may have been a life of rebellion and squander like the younger brother but when you turn to God and repent of your sin God runs to you and welcomes you with open arms and kisses. In God's kingdom, this is something the father celebrates.

The Lost Heart - *(Don't show slide till indicated later in this point.)*

This would seem to be a good place to end our story. We all like happy endings. But Jesus isn't done. He has a surprise in the story that turned the tables. The elder brother had been at work in the field. That is where he always

seemed to be. He was planting, harvesting and selling as he stashed away a small fortune. Now that his brother was gone, it would all soon be his. Returning from the field, he couldn't believe his ears. There was a party at home, in the middle of a work day. He summoned a servant who told him the good news.

"Your bother has returned! Master! Isn't it wonderful? He is back! He is showing a little wear and tear but he is okay! Your father is so happy he has killed the fattened calf and told everyone to celebrate."

Rather than joining the party, the older brother was angry. The word used here for anger isn't mildly perturbed but boiling anger. He absolutely refused to go in. His father came out and tried to reason with him but the older son would have none of it and in his rage, rather than guarding his lips, he said what was on his mind, just like his younger brother had done months or years earlier.

'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' Luke 15:29-30

The elder brother hadn't left his father's home, but he left his father's heart.

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The elder brother looked good on the outside. He was respectable, obedient, steady and dependable around the house, and while he was set to inherit all of his father's house, he lost something even more important than his father's money, the love of his father's heart.

Imagine what would have happened if the elder brother had seen the younger brother before his father did. *"So you've come back? Things didn't*

work out like you thought? Too bad! Listen little brother, you aren't welcome here. You broke your poor father's heart. You disgraced the family name. You just came to mooch more money off our old man. Be gone, you are not welcome here!"

The older brother was filled with arrogance, pride and judgmentalism. He had no love and compassion for his brother. While the younger brother traveled to a distant country on the outside, the older brother traveled to a distant country on the inside.

My friends, are we a church of older brothers? Everything looks good, we look respectable, we try to be God fearing and God honoring, but do we have our father's heart. Do we have any love in our heart for those around us who are lost? Are we seeking them? God says, *I love lost people*. I have more joy when one lost person repents in Spirit Lake than I do from everyone worshipping me in the entire church. They throw parties in heaven when people are saved, why don't we throw them on earth?

Maybe I have too much hope for this message, but I really want it to change the way we look at things. I want us to be a church that has the father's heart. I want us to be a church that loves and seeks the lost. I want us to be a church that celebrates the things they celebrate in heaven.

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I want to get real practical about this. Our mission is to Reach our Region with the gospel and this morning I am announcing a summer evangelism strategy called, "Reaching our Region - Knowing our Neighbors."

On the back of your outline you have some scratch paper. I am going to give you a little time before we leave to work on this. Think through your neighbors. If you don't have neighbors, think through your co-workers. Who, in your neighborhood, really needs Jesus? Not someone who is going to another church. I want each of us to leave with the names of three people we want to get to know and with whom we can share the gospel. Sharing the gospel is simply telling people, God loves them, Jesus died to forgive all of their sin. That is all it is.

Before you leave, in the back we have a map of our region. I want you to put three white pins on approximate locations of the three neighbors you are seeking and loving this summer. During this summer, when you move from intentions to reality and actually get together with them, come back and change your pin from a white to a blue. If any of these people we are seeking trust in Christ, change your pins from a blue to a red. This summer, we are going to be praying for our map and watching our map change as we reach our region with the gospel of Christ.

Does anyone have questions?



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