

“Finding Yourself and God”

Luke 15:1-10

September 16th, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

These three parables about lostness tell us about the caring nature of God and God’s kingdom. We really have to thank Luke for the way he collected these teachings of Jesus and gave us an overall context to help us see why Jesus told these stories. The way Luke put these teachings together, plus the fact that he was the only one who wrote down the lost coin and the prodigal son stories, shows us the true reason Jesus taught this material.

In Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom or reign of God, He talked about how people, even religious leaders, were unreliable.¹ Next He told the parable of the foolishness of the millionaire who felt justified in eating, drinking and merrymaking but didn’t realize until it was too late that he couldn’t take it with him.²

Jesus then told his disciples about how most of the world is absolutely driven by their anxiety about earthly things – their food and clothing – while they completely forget about their loving and caring God Who seems to take care of even the birds.³ He compared the value of saving money and things here with gaining permanent treasures in Heaven.⁴ If you would have been among those He taught, you would have then heard Jesus speak about the importance of being mindful of God’s agenda instead of being caught up with earthly concerns alone.⁵

Jesus then also taught about the nature of God’s kingdom while He was in the middle of a dinner party with some religious leaders.⁶ His parable about the great banquet condemned all who are too busy to receive



¹ Luke 12:13-15

² Luke 12:16-21

³ Luke 12:22-32

⁴ Luke 12:33-34

⁵ Luke 12:35-56 He taught about the stupidity of obeying human laws that were actually a barrier to doing good to those who suffered (Lk. 13:10-17). He talked of those who would be excluded from the kingdom of God because they live their lives by always taking the easy road.

what God has to offer them.⁷ The parable announced that God is going to other people than those who were just focused on themselves.

Not long after that, Jesus was talking to groups of people about what it costs you when you go against the popular trends in society in order to follow Him.⁸ About how following God’s way has to make a difference or you’re not worth your salt.⁹ And then Luke gives us the context of why Jesus told these three parables about lostness.



The parable of “The Lost Sheep” and that of the story of “The Lost Coin” are followed by the third parable about lostness: “The Prodigal Son.” We know, from the context of who Jesus told these parables to – the judgmental Scribes and Pharisees – that “The Prodigal Son” story *should have been called* “the Grudging Elder Brother” by our modern Bible publishers.¹⁰

It is clear that Jesus was frustrated, if not angry, with the criticism He was getting from the Pharisees and the Scribes.¹¹ So when Jesus heard these religious leaders grouse about His association with tax collectors and so-called “sinners,” Jesus told them to listen up.

He asked them this question with the obvious answer – ‘Who among you, if you were watching sheep, wouldn’t drop what you were doing and go

⁶ Luke 14:1-6

⁷ Luke 14:15-24

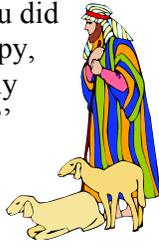
⁸ Luke 14:25-33

⁹ Luke 14:34-35

¹⁰ Because it is the modern publishing houses who have put these titles for the parables in our English translations of the Greek. Titles to sections of the scripture didn’t exist in the original manuscripts.

¹¹ Pharisees were devout religious laymen who tried to create a portable Jewish religion without being dependent on the priests and their temple and sacrifice rituals. In doing so, however, they (and their religious lawyers, the Scribes) ended up creating a religion for the home and neighborhood synagogue that imposed a legalistic burden (“making people twice as fit for Hell as they were themselves” in Jesus’ words.

out and try to find a lost sheep? And if you did find your lost sheep, wouldn't you be happy, bringing it home on your shoulder, joyfully telling your friends you've gotten it back? 'I'm telling you, the entirety of heaven rejoices when one of these folks is found – compared to all of you who seemingly have made it. So Stop your grousing!' Jesus was telling them.¹²



If Jesus were here this morning, would He have to tell anyone to stop their negative complaining? Would any of us have to be confronted for negative, judging words about other people whom we don't think are worth the ministry attention of others?



Then there is the second and similar question He tossed at them. 'If you were a woman with only ten silver coins and you lost one – wouldn't you turn the whole house upside down to find it? And once recovering a tenth of all you own, wouldn't you rejoice with relief over finding it? I'm telling you that the angels of God have the same grateful relief when someone, who is completely lost in life, repents of their travels down the wrong path and finds their way back.'

To leave them speechless and perhaps with a gut-wrenching tear in their eye, Jesus finishes off His incitement of their hostile religious judging and negativity by telling them the story of the prodigal son.



You see, those know-it-all perfect-in-their-own-mind religious leaders were going through their lives with only one camera angle on reality. As they walked through their days, all they saw (because of their hierarchical mind-set) were two kinds of people: "good" people and "bad" people. To keep their minds doing no work at all, they looked at themselves (and others who imitated them) as "good." Everyone else, particularly people who were not like them, were judged as "bad."

Jesus was telling them that if they're not part of the solution, they're part of the problem.¹³ They

¹² in effect

¹³ I believe that statement, which has become cliché, is attributed to Eldridge Cleaver who wrote and spoke about

were actually a problem to the kingdom of God because their caustic religious negativity toward others was actually keeping out the very people who need to experience the unconditional love of God in order to get turned around and find their way home.

The *persistent caring* of the shepherd and the woman searching for the lost coin was clearly missing from these religious leaders. With their limited outlook on life, they were, essentially, sitting around and saying to Jesus' friends: "Look, you've lost your sheep. You've lost your coin. How stupid of you; now you've really got yourself in a jam and it's your own fault."

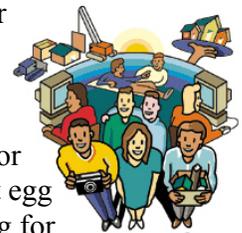
Have you ever lost your way, at some point in your life, and you could almost hear the sneering from the sidelines from other people who were lined up to cheer your misfortune?



Jesus was trying to tell these leaders, with these three parables, that there's another camera angle on life that they're completely missing. It is the view God has of people who have lost their way. From their limited judging vantage point in life, when they openly criticized Jesus for the company He kept – they couldn't see that Jesus was making the effort to reach out and find people who weren't making it in life. People who were right out there in their careers and social involvement but who were not able to find God or meaning in their lives.



I think most of our society is driven by an illusion of who we are supposed to be and by an illusion of what happiness is about. Most of us have been lost in this illusion at one time or another. We got ourselves through the schooling and into a family or career. In the back of our minds, we've had that Martha-Steward-decorated home within the affluent gated community hanging like a carrot ahead of us for years. That extra degree. That nest egg of Certificate of Deposits "working for us" and continually building for our financial security in the future.



We've had times in our lives when we've been living so much for the future that we completely lost

racism in America in the 1960's.

ourselves – who we are and what is most important to us. We’ve all gotten lost in the illusion of the shallow “American Dream.”

Perhaps we’ve lived so many years trying to secure what we have and provide insurance policies that would *guarantee* that we would never lose any *thing* in our life that we don’t even know what we value anymore. Many actually have to be looking at divorce in the face, or bankruptcy or have that heart attack or a cancer diagnosis before we stop the madness. Before we realize how lost we are. How many years have we lived, looking at other people’s problematic lives – like those smug Pharisees – still thinking in terms of “them” and “us?” Have we missed God’s camera angle that compassionately tries to help people get un-lost?



What keeps us lost, in life, are all the labels and judgments we place on others that create barriers between us. It’s like we’re in the dance hall of life with our dance card stuffed deep down in our pocket. We often become observers of the dance of life rather than getting on the dance floor with others. We end up judging and watching people live life rather than participating. This keeps us from becoming alive to life.



To become alive to the life we were given, we have to think, feel and actually become connected to others. It’s about being on the *journey* of life together, not huddling in proximity at a *destination*. We should be hearing and feeling and moving together with the rhythm of common melodies.



There will always be those who are stuck back behind the punch bowl, judging people’s dress and dancing abilities rather than trying to join in our common search for the beauty each of us have and the love God has for us. If you go to a church or any gathering of people who claim to be truly open to finding God, here is my personal advice.

Assuming *you* are truly open to engage in finding God yourself and open to finding beauty and to learn from other people, join in the dance. You can’t do this holistically on the Internet or in reading alone, but make an effort to become a part of some group of people who claim to seek God. Give people the same benefit of the doubt that you hope they will give you, because *you* don’t always

clearly express your heart’s desires and others you meet will occasionally be inconsistent in how they communicate what is in their hearts.

But as you take the risk of getting involved, in some way and at some level, look for the sincerity and the integrity in their personal character. You know we’re not talking about perfection. But give me and others in this gathering, or any other group you seek to join, close scrutiny. Ask yourself if you honestly and truly see, in me and in the rest of us, an authentic sense that we are all in a quest to find God in our lives.

By the time you reached thirty, you learned to spot phoniness a mile away. It is extremely complicated to describe the dynamic of how we can find people who are authentic to the core of their character. I suggest a few areas to consider in asking these questions because they suggest ways we can be more mindful of who *we* are in our attempts to be authentic.

① First, try to sense if the person is truly there with you. Not flipping through their mind’s calendar or list of things they feel they must be doing in the next few minutes, hours or days. You can determine if they are focused, intently, on what you are saying to the extent that they are asking you to clarify what you’re expressing or pursuing your conversation with their eyes, their minds and their body.

Some of you have told me that your spouse hasn’t listened to you for years so you feel ‘what’s the use?’ You say they don’t even understand the concept of being truly present with another person – more less do they seem aware of what intimacy is about. You might not be interrupted, as you communicate, but is there any response? If there’s no response, call 9-1-1. To be realistic, we have to face the fact that a number of people in our lives will go to their graves, never knowing what it is like to be totally present and attentive to another person. In a way, they’re dead already and are seemingly without hope.

But this first question should be asked of each of us. Are you really here now? Have you bothered to show up in this conversation, . . . in this gathering, . . . to give your full attention to what is happening in this worship service? Are you truly present as you stand before another person who perhaps is looking, intently into your eyes, hoping against hope that they

might find God's Spirit living inside your body? Because if they can't sense God in you or me, maybe they should leave and look elsewhere.

② Secondly, a person might be standing before you, present and focused, but are they actively trying to learn from you?

Let's say a person with you is not fuzzy in their thinking and they are making an effort to be present – to be with you in that moment – but are they listening? By what they ask, how intent are they (given their energy levels)? Do they have the desire to learn from you and your experiences for their quest to know more about God? Are they taking you in, like you take in an artist's work at the Albright Knox Art Gallery? Do they have the personal driving desire to have their spiritual journey informed and enlightened by your experiences with God thus far?

When you take the risk of approaching people in a group who claims to seek God, if they don't have the desire to constantly learn and be informed by the experiences, thoughts and feelings of others, go elsewhere. Seek out others, somewhere else, who passionately want to find out more about God. Life is far too short to spend with people who don't.



Equally applying it to us, do you approach another human being with a driving personal desire to benefit from their walk in life? When God has personally shown up here in the form of a person, did you miss meeting God? When they told you about an experience they had or an insight they were grateful to discover in a book, did you get it? Did you hear the voice of God personally speaking to you and your faith journey?

③ Lastly, look for the humility – particularly in the individuals who are designated as leaders. In every group of people, there are some who are going to be speaking a little more than others. These are the people who will be trying to communicate, teach or help others. As you approach them and if they are ① present in the moment with you and even if ② they desire to listen to you to learn with you of God, you should see ③ basic recognizable humility.

But it only follows. If you can ① forget about your needs and agenda long enough to actually be present in the moment with another human being;

and if you ② have the passionate desire to learn from their joys and pain about God's walk in their life; you already have ③ that humility that constantly tells you that you and the other person are intimately connected and equally loved by God. That, in my opinion, is how God's Spirit thinks and feels living within us.

“It's such a mystery
How God found something in us
that we never knew was there
But God uncovered it so easily
God turned us like a season
And we began to change
Since God wrapped Self all around us
We know we've never been the same

Chorus

That's how love works
That's how love moves
Like a river running through you
Sometimes it lifts you high as heaven
It consumes you, but that's a given
That's how love moves

We've seen walls that could never be broken
come tumbling down
We've heard the voice of love when it's calling
Without making a sound
See, we were touched by an angel
The day God took our hand
And you know that it's a miracle
That makes us everything we are
That's how love works
That's how love moves
Like a river running through you
Sometimes it lifts you high as heaven
It consumes you, but that's a given
That's how love moves”¹⁴



¹⁴ This is “That's How Love Moves” sung by Faith Hill on her *Breathe* CD, written by Jennifer Kimball & Fitzgerald Scott & Ty Lacy; originally a love song sung in the first person, edited by Philip Siddons to create this hymn that is written in the third person.