

SERMON TITLE: “Lost and Found”
TEXT: Luke 15:8-10
PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church
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SCRIPTURE READING (LUKE 15:1-10)

Good morning! It’s good to be back together in one service.

Some of you know that I am a blogger, which means that *I* host a website where *I* write about whatever topics *I* feel like writing about for however long *I* feel about it and interact with whichever comments *I* feel like interacting with.

Blogging is the perfect form of modern communication because I can make it all about me!

But leaving aside its narcissistic tendencies, one of the neat things about blogging is that you get to “meet” some really interesting people from all over the world. Quite literally *anyone* can arrive from anywhere via almost any kind of online search and begin to interact with something I or some other commenter has written.

It’s kind of like one big living room where people from all over the place are always wandering in and out of.

Some of these guests are polite and interesting, they fit in well with the general atmosphere of the “room,” and you’re glad that they took the time to drop by. Others come in with mud on their shoes and put their feet up on the furniture, root around through the fridge, and leave a mess when they leave! They’re rude and disrespectful, and they mostly irritate the other guests!

Happily, there are more of the former than the latter! And I have found myself making “friends,” or at least acquaintances, via my blog, and have begun to follow the lives and writings of people I would otherwise never have had any connection to! Strange days...

Anyway, a fellow blogger from Winnipeg who I have gotten to “know” online had an interesting post this week that I thought I was relevant as we continue to make our way through our sermon series on the Parables of the Kingdom.

Few paintings throughout the world are as well known as Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa. The image also one of the most reproduced of any other.... With up to 6 million people visiting her in the Louvre every year, she is considered the most famous painting in the world.

*It is surprising for many viewers, then, when they find themselves **underwhelmed** by the experience. Guides at the Louvre have noticed many people walk away confused, perplexed and even frustrated. Many go home, complaining that they didn’t get out of the experience what they had hoped. “What was all the hoopla, anyway?” they wonder and some never give the mysterious lady another thought.*

The reasons for this are fascinating. Her very popularity (and the resulting mass reproduction) might contribute to over familiarity. In an odd twist, the very fame that leads to the many copies makes the original unremarkable. Yet, people still buy the posters and t-shirts because the fame of the picture has become more of a draw than the artwork itself. Few things illustrated this better than when the Mona Lisa was stolen and thousands lined up to stare at the empty space on the museum wall.

The same thing is true of Jesus, he argued. Like the Mona Lisa, Jesus is famous around the world! In fact, he's probably one of the most famous people who ever lived.

But just like the Mona Lisa, people often figure they have a pretty good idea who Jesus was and what he represents, so they give him a quick look (or listen) and move on. They are "underwhelmed."

I think my blogger friend is right.

One of the things I have noticed so far as I have read the parables, as I have listened to James preach and prepared sermons myself, is that I have had to battle against the familiarity of these parables. Maybe the same is true for you.

In a sense, we know them *too* well!

Now, this may sound completely contradictory—how can we know the parables too well?! Haven't you pastors been saying that we need to read these again and again, so that they become a part of us?

Well, yes, that's true. We *do* need read the parables (and all of Scripture), and we *do* need to allow it to shape us. It is impossible for God to work through Scripture if we don't read or hear it!

But there is **good familiarity** and **bad familiarity**. If you've grown up in the church, like me, you've heard a *lot* about Jesus over the course of your life. Thousands of sermons (45 X 25 = 1125!), Sunday School classes, Bible studies... Jesus, Jesus, Jesus... and it all gets pretty familiar.

Bad familiarity says, "oh yeah, I've heard that story, and I know what it means." Bad familiarity assumes that we have nothing more to learn, that there is nothing else going on than what we have always thought was going on.

Bad familiarity looks at:

1. The Good Samaritan and thinks, well *everyone* knows that this means we're supposed to be good neighbours and help others—even people with no religious background no what the term "Good Samaritan" means! ... and that's true, BUT the parable also has a lot to say about other things like how we define who's "in" and "out," what God thinks about the "unclean," about Jesus' teaching method in making the question personal, etc
2. The Parable of the Sower—well *everyone* knows that it's about the different kinds of soil that the seed of the Gospel can fall on... and that's true... BUT... it's also about

shaking up people's understanding of what the kingdom looks like, and it's about getting us to examine our *own* soil!

3. The Parable of the Rich Fool—*everyone* knows this is about storing up treasures in heaven as opposed to earth... but what does that actually *mean*?

Bad familiarity assumes that we've pretty much got this Jesus figured out.

I faced this danger on Tuesday morning as I sat down with this parable. Oh yeah, well this is the parable that tells us to be concerned for the "lost." Nice and simple, right....

Well, maybe not...

Each week I send out some questions to the care group leaders to use in their groups as they discuss Sunday's sermons, and I leave a little encouragement at the top that says, "Be open to having your assumptions challenged!"

I think this is our challenge in every parable we encounter.

One of the things that I have been convicted by again and again throughout our series on the parables is that *Jesus' parables were addressed to religious people who were pretty sure they had God figured out!*

Jesus came to change our mind about who God is.

Parables tell the truth about God and they tell the truth about ourselves. And they demand a response in how we live.

A BIGGER SHEEP PEN

So, as we heard, today's parable is about a lost sheep. I don't particularly like to think of myself as a "sheep." It kind of gives the impression of a dumb animal that just follows all the other animals around. We don't like this image in our modern, autonomous, independent culture.

But the people Jesus was addressing in the parable had a long history of understanding themselves through this metaphor.

They had all kinds of passages from their Hebrew Scriptures to reinforce this

- Psalm 78:52: led out of Egypt
- Psalm 79:13; 95:7: a description of Israel's identity ("the sheep of your pasture")

Israel was God's prized possession!

When Israel strayed, they used sheep language as well:

- Psalm 119:176: “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments.”
- Isaiah 53:6—All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
- Jeremiah 50:6—“My people have been lost sheep. Their shepherds have led them astray, turning them away on the mountains. From mountain to hill they have gone. They have forgotten their fold.

We could keep going... The point is, “sheep” language was very common in Israel’s self-understanding,

BUT, it always referred to *them*, God’s chosen people. It did *not* refer to unclean outsiders!

In these parables, Jesus is pushing his listeners’ to have the same concern for the lost that he does! He is pushing them to embrace his concern for outsiders. He is telling them that God’s sheep pen is bigger and more diverse than they perhaps would have liked it to be!

He says this clearly in John 10:16:

I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.

This is a message we need to hear today as well.

Last week, we had a long church council meeting where we talked about things like church vision and where we want to see our church go (talk to a council member, if you have input!). One of the things that came up again and again was that as a church we do not exist for ourselves.

“The church is the only organization in the world that exists for the sake of its non-members.”

We cannot become insular where we are concerned mostly about ourselves. Discipleship is important—i.e., we do need to help people move along in their walk with Jesus—but it can become very easy to spend all of our time in the sheep pen.

Maybe we think that if the pen looks attractive and fence is well maintained and the sheep are well groomed and cleaned up, then other sheep will just naturally want to jump in! Maybe we think that we can just call out from the pen and the lost sheep will come.

But Jesus makes it pretty clear that the lost sheep must be actively pursued (this is even clearer in the parable of the lost coin—there is a diligence to the woman’s pursuit of what is lost).

Lost sheep are not necessarily just going to see a nice pen full of well-fed sheep and come running.

This does *not* mean going out and yelling at the sheep about what ignorant and immoral sheep they are, and screaming out the directions to the pen!

A while back someone sent me a YouTube video that they had some concerns about. It was of a very angry young youth pastor in the States who was quite convinced that the most effective way to reach the lost was to shout at them (at length) about how they were going to burn eternally in hell for their immorality (which turned out to be mainly the movies they watched and language they used), and that he didn't really care if people thought he was angry or offensive because he was just being true to the gospel.

Not the greatest way to get sheep into the pen.

Not only is this ineffective, but it is unbiblical. 2 Peter 3:15 says that we are to always be ready to give a reason for the hope we have *with gentleness and respect*.

It also does *not* mean just going out and finding a whole bunch of sheep who look and sound pretty much like us.

We need to notice what comes before the actual stories of the lost sheep and lost coin. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are ticked off because he is hanging out with the wrong crowd—he's too willing to be associated with "sinners" and "tax collectors."

Could the same be said of us? Are we "too willing" to be associated with the wrong type of people? Who are modern day "tax collectors?"

I think it's safe to say that it is the people who are most marginalized, most looked down on, most poorly thought of. If we look there, we are looking where Jesus looked.

So what *does* it mean? As I've said many times, many people in our culture have heard enough words. They need to see action. They need to see people who act like Jesus did—who welcome the "sinners," who eat with them, who listen to them, who ask good questions. Who share the good news. Who love them.

A SHEPHERD WHO LOVES ALL

So, we see that God's concern goes beyond the religious people who have their act together and who are safely inside the pen. God has an urgent concern for the outsider, the unwelcome, the unwanted, the rejected, the "unclean"

In Luke 5:29-32, Jesus reminds us that it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick!

But it is an error to assume that God values the outsider more highly than the "insider." There is an urgency to God's pursuit of those outside the pen, but we are all valued in God's eyes.

Our value comes from God. This is a truth that we can never hear too frequently (Luke 12:24; “how much more valuable are you than birds”).

I think that we, as human beings, are very good at seeking other sources of value than the value we have as God’s children.

I read an article in the Wall Street Journal this week about the “Tiger Mom,” Amy Chua (author, professor at Yale Law School). The article was called “Why Chinese Moms Are Superior”¹ and she talks about her own parenting strategy. Her kids were not allowed to do any of the following:

- attend a sleepover
- have a playdate
- be in a school play
- complain about not being in a school play
- watch TV or play computer games
- choose their own extracurricular activities
- get any grade less than an A
- not be the No. 1 student in every subject except gym and drama
- play any instrument other than the piano or violin
- not play the piano or violin.

Now I should be clear that Ms. Chua is very aware of how this is perceived, and is

But, as I read the article, I felt sorry for this woman’s kids! I also wondered if the article was as much about parenting styles as it was about a desperate search for identity and acceptance.

For her, it is quite clear: identity comes from ACCOMPLISHMENT. It is *earned*. If you screw up, it reflects badly on the family, so don’t fail!

We must *perform* to be accepted, to be validated, to be loved, and accepted.

I think that all of us fall victim to this mentality, at times. Our mental states go up and down based on the state of our fortunes... whether we are satisfied at our job, whether our kids are doing OK, whether we are climbing the ladder, making enough money, whether we are fit and active enough, reading the right books, etc.

We all have ways of earning our identity.

And just like we all have ways of trying to earn our identity, I suspect that all of us go through times where we know we can’t do enough, and we wonder if really are valuable. We don’t all experience this in the same way or with the same frequency or duration, but I think we all go through periods where the doubts nag at us... What if I can’t do enough? What if my time has passed? What if I’m the exception?

¹ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704111504576059713528698754.html>

And what Jesus tells us in this parable is that we are valued because we are one of his sheep. Listen to the language in 15:5 and 9-10. It is the language of *rejoicing!*

Our deepest sense of identity and belonging comes from being a child of God. We are a source of joy to God, and God's joy is complete when we are walking in the right direction with him.

Paul reminds the church in Rome of the persistence of God's love in Romans 8:38-39:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

MORE THAN ONE WAY TO BE LOST: ALWAYS REPENTING

Earlier I talked about “bad familiarity” where we think we are no longer open to experiencing something new about or from Jesus because we think we know him so well.

One of the questions I thought about this week was: So what does “good familiarity” look like?

I think the answer might lie in 15:7. Jesus says this, about the shepherd who has found the 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.

I don't know about you, but I hear a bit of sarcasm here... One commentator I read this week suggested that we read “righteous people who don't need to repent” out loud with a smile on their face and a question mark at the end. Something like this...

Because of course, there is no such thing as someone who doesn't need to repent! And there is more than one way to be lost.

When we read the parable, we see the words “repent” and “repentance.” The Greek word for this is *metanoia* and it's worth unpacking this word a bit.

We sometimes think that to “repent” means to apologize for what we've done, sorry for our sins, etc. This is certainly part of what repentance is, but *metanoia* is a much more comprehensive term. It means to reorient oneself, to start again, to turn around and start out in another direction.

Metanoia is a “whole life” word that has to do with the direction we are facing, the road we are walking on, the one we are oriented towards. It’s not just a prayer or a bunch of words that we say that are ticket into the pen. Repentance means continually reorienting ourselves!

I don’t know about you, but I find myself doing this all the time!

The parable makes it very clear that there is a party in heaven when we make that initial decision to follow Jesus. But I think there is also joy in God’s heart when we make daily decisions—in the office, in the classroom, with our kids or our parents, and all of the other routines of daily life—to follow Jesus, to love God and our neighbours (even, or especially, the “sinners and tax-collectors” who are lost).

Sometimes getting ourselves properly on the path will require a pretty radical turn; sometimes it will be a slight adjustment to get us back on course.

But we are always to live *metanoia* lives, where we are always turning to face Christ on the path. This is what brings God joy. This is what gets the party in heaven started.

MOVING TO COMMUNION

This is one of the things that the Lord’s Supper is meant to remind us of. In a minute, James is going to come up and lead us through communion.

But just before he comes, I want to let you know that we are going to be listening to a song called “The Love of Christ is Rich and Free” for the first part of communion. It is a hymn from the late 1700’s or early 1800’s that has been put to new music.

(There’s a word that might be foreign to you: “**surety**.” This words means “One who has contracted to be responsible for another, especially one who assumes responsibilities or debts in the event of default.”

The song talks about the persistent love of Christ. It is a love that pursues lost sheep, even when we wander from the pen. It is a love that takes up our cause, and redeems us through shed blood on the cross, and brings us back to God. It is a love that loves us until the end.

I like the song because it reminds us of what I think is the central truth of this parable, and of the gospel in general:

Our God is a determined lover.

He pursues the lost. He refines and redeems and protects and calls back and reorients the found.

Thanks be to God.



