

**Luke 15:1-10**  
**September 11, 2016**

Today we are challenged to ask some basic questions: Who's lost? Who's not? Who needs finding? Who doesn't? Who is in not just mortal danger but eternal danger? Keep these in mind as we begin.

There is a curious thing happening in our text today. The gospel of Luke has been building up to a crisis point. Jesus' whole ministry has been building up to something. God so loved the world, that He sent His only begotten Son. Who did Jesus come for? ... the world. Who did Jesus die for? ... everyone.

Most of the time people look at other people with a certain set of glasses. It's us and them. It's us versus them. Us against them. For God's Old Testament people there were Jews, the chosen ones, and there were Gentiles, everybody else. Unless you were a Samaritan and that was even worse. For the Greeks, you were either Greek or you were Barbarian. You were "other". You were the "hoi polloi". Most of the time "us" are the favoured ones and "them" are the "great masses of the unwashed", the polluted ones.

Tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. They were society's outcasts and not worthy of salvation. They were too far gone to ever be brought back to God. They were not worth the effort. At least that's what many people thought. So the Pharisees and teachers of the law were muttering and grumbling to themselves. They were shaking their heads in disbelief. "*This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" Doesn't He know who these people are? What a mistake. Why would He waste His time on them? Why would He try to teach them about God? They are hopeless, beyond salvation, and they can't use a Saviour. They are trapped in the prison of sin and they are unredeemable! In contrast, we see the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They are the "in crowd". They are God's favoured ones. They don't need a Saviour either or so they thought. That pretty much leaves Jesus in the unemployment line. He can't save this group over here. He doesn't need to save that group over there. That doesn't leave Him with very much to do, or does it?

Jesus begins with two parables, a story about a lost sheep and a story about a lost coin. We are going to start with the sheep. It's hard to talk about lost sheep in general, so we are going to look at two lost sheep case studies. In John 4 Jesus was met by a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. It was noon and Jesus' disciples had gone into town to buy food. When the woman approached, Jesus asked her if she would draw water for Him from the well. Jesus didn't carry a rope and bucket with Him, so He needed some help. Now here's the first thing you need to see: You don't need divine omniscience to know this woman's spiritual condition. The other women in town would have come to draw water first thing in the morning. They had families to look after and chores to do. They would have come all together as a group. This was their morning social time together with friends. But this woman didn't have any family and she didn't have any friends. Oh, she had male friends. She was a husband stealer who'd probably just rolled out of bed. She would be part of that group of tax collectors and sinners, who in the view of most people were beyond help. No one could save them. Jesus, if you are looking for lost sheep, this one is a lost cause!

In John 3, a man named Nicodemus came to meet Jesus one night. Nicodemus is part of that other group. He was a Pharisee. He was one of the good guys. He knew sin when he saw it and there was no sin clinging to him. He didn't need a Saviour. His life carried with it the sweet aroma of self-righteousness. Except that to God, self-righteousness is no sweet smell. It stinks! Do you remember what Jesus said to him? He said, "*You have to be born again.*" You have to start over.

Here's what I mean: The first video game our kids ever got was Mario Brothers. You know, chasing mushrooms, avoiding dangers, catching stars, all of it in the pursuit of rescuing the princess and living happily ever after. It was often a frustrating game. You started with three lives. You could gain a few more here and there, and there were shortcuts that would get you closer and closer to the goal. But the outcome was pretty much inevitable, "Game Over". You would have to go back to the beginning and start all over again. That is what the pursuit of self-righteousness before God is ultimately like. No matter how well you start out or how far you might get, it only takes one mistake, only one slip, only one sin, and it's "Game Over".

Nicodemus, you have to be born again. Your self-righteousness stinks. You need to start over but you need to do it a different way. You need someone else to do righteousness for you. You need a Saviour. The woman at the well on the one hand and Nicodemus on the other hand were at the opposite ends of the ethical and moral landscape. And both of

them were lost. Both of them were sheep who had strayed from the flock. Both of them needed the searching heart and loving arms of a Shepherd who would risk everything to find them and bring them home. Now here's the really cool thing: the cure, the remedy for both of them was the same. Nicodemus needs to be born again, by water and the Spirit. The woman at the well needs, wait for it, living water.

Jesus says, "*Whoever believes in me shall never thirst.*" Revelation 7:15-17 says this of God's saints, "*Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will shelter them with His presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*"

St. Paul reminds us that God's Old Testament people "*All drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.*" These parables are set to teach us about the heart and love of God for sinners. That's the first lesson we need to learn. God so loved this sinful and fallen world that He sent His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. The heart and love of God for sinners is what Jesus' ministry is all about. The Pharisees had made a surprising observation. Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. This is most certainly true but you have to think it and say it another way. Not with disdain in your heart and scorn on your lips but with relief in your heart and joy on your lips.

What do our hearts look like? Do you live in despair that you are beyond salvation? Do you live in the false confidence that you don't need Jesus? Or are you somewhere in between? Each one of us is that hurt and wounded, lost and bleeding sheep that Jesus searches for with all His strength. And when He finds me and rescues me and brings me home it's hard to tell who is happier, Him or me. There is one thing I do know. When I see His heart for the lost and when His strong arm rescues me from eternal disaster, I begin to have a heart like His. If we don't have a heart and a love for the lost, then we are still among the lost. The heart and love of God for sinners is what the Scriptures are all about. You see it in the Old Testament lesson today, God's love and care for His lost sheep, and His gracious promise to gather them and bring them home. The Pharisees had rejected Jesus because they thought that they were doing very well on their own. St. Paul was once one of them until he was rescued by the grace of God. Jesus led him to realize his sinful and lost condition, that he was the worst of sinners; that he was not worthy to be an apostle because he persecuted the church of Christ, that he was a fool to think he could be saved on his own.

The lost don't always know they are lost. The parables of Jesus here in our text today are for our ears too. It's our nature to be sinners, to be sheep with itchy feet, feet that love to wander. Even after we've been found, we have to be reminded how easy it is to become lost again. "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,*" Paul says. Then he adds, "*Of whom I am the worst.*" Present tense, he is still a sinner in need of the forgiveness brought by Jesus every day. What we see here is the nature of the heart of God. All the while we are off finding ourselves, being our own persons, doing our own things, God is busy searching to bring the lost ones back to himself. His desire is to restore them.

Do you think God is desperate in His search? He knows the danger of being lost. He knows its eternal consequences in ways that we cannot imagine. So single minded is His purpose that He sent Jesus to suffer and die on the cross to rescue the lost and bring them back into His kingdom. God's love for sinners is shown in Jesus' willing association with sinners, and in His willing suffering and death for sinners, and in His unbounded joy when sinners repent and the lost are found and restored to the heavenly fold. Our worship and praise today happens because He has found and rescued each of us and restored us to His fold by faith in Christ Jesus.

Now that you and I have been brought to that saving faith in Jesus, there are some things we should keep in mind. We need to support and help one another when the devil comes with his temptations. We need to care for each other the way God would like us to. We need to continually listen to the voice of Jesus the Good Shepherd. It is foolish to think that as long as He has His eyes on me, I don't have to keep my eyes on Him. That would be to presume on the grace of God. Our Lord Jesus wants us to help others to come into the fold, to stay in the fold and to grow in grace. We need to rejoice when the lost are found and brought home. Rejoice when you hear again the words of forgiveness and you are strengthened in faith. Rejoice and thank God when you have the opportunity to be used by Him to help others. Rejoice and thank God when He lets you see His Word working in the heart and life of another person.