

Lost Sheep

LUKE 15:1-7

Baxter T. Exum (#1305)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
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This morning I want us to study a request that was made by one of our members back in November. One of our members has asked that we study this: Caring enough to communicate loving concern for others. What an interesting request! I've been thinking about this for several months now, and I keep coming back to a passage where some of the religious leaders in the First Century were actually upset at Jesus for caring TOO MUCH for people. It is hard for us to imagine someone getting mad at anyone for showing too much compassion. And yet when we read through the New Testament, we find several passages where the scribes and the Pharisees did, in fact, get mad at Jesus for showing too much compassion toward those who were lost. The passage I want us to consider this morning is found in the opening verses of Luke 15 (p. 1630). I chose this passage because this is one of those times when the Lord actually responds to his critics. He responds, in fact, with a series of three parables. A parable is basically a short story or illustration with a double meaning. The word PARABLE literally means, "to cast alongside," and so we have the picture of two balls being thrown next to each other. Last Sunday, many of us went bowling down at Dream Lanes. When I think of a parable, I think of two people bowling next to each other at the same time. In one lane there is the story, but then in the other lane there is the double, or hidden, or much deeper meaning. We think of the Parable of the Soils, for example, where a sower went out to sow, and the seed fell on various types of soil. On the surface, we have a lesson about farming. But we know, of course, that there is a much deeper meaning to that story. This past Wednesday evening in the adult class, we studied a parable from the Old Testament book of 2 Samuel as the prophet Nathan spoke to King David about a rich man who took a poor man's lamb. On the surface, that was a story about two families and a lamb. But we know, of course, that Nathan was speaking a parable, a story with a much deeper meaning. And that is what we see here in Luke 15.

Jesus is eating with the tax collectors and sinners. These are people who were not religious, but they seem to be seeking. For whatever reason, they were looking for something more in life. Perhaps the financial rewards of collecting taxes were no longer truly satisfying. Perhaps the sinners just couldn't get over the emptiness of life. And so for whatever reason, these are people who could see something in Jesus that was missing in their own lives, and so the Lord was intriguing in that way. They could see something in the Lord that they were missing, and so they came to the Lord and they ate together. They were not ignoring him or avoiding him, they were not hostile toward him; instead, the tax collectors and sinners were attracted to him! Why is that? It certainly wasn't because Jesus had an easy message. It wasn't because Jesus was soft on sin. It wasn't because Jesus told them to just keep on doing what they were doing. So why were they spending time with Jesus? I

believe they hung out with Jesus, because they could see that Jesus cared. They could sense the Lord's compassion. So here is quite a lesson for us right here at the beginning, and that is: People today should be able to look at us, knowing that we are Christians, and they should feel comfortable approaching us with their spiritual needs and concerns. People need to know that we care. That is what these people seem to have done with Jesus. They were eating together. And that is where the scribes and the Pharisees come in. They object. They think Jesus is doing a little too much communicating. They think the Lord is showing just a little bit too much compassion.

So, as we study the request, "Caring enough to communicate loving concern for others," I want us to consider what happens here in Luke 15 as Jesus defends himself from the accusation that he was showing a little too much concern. Notice, please Luke 15:1-7,

¹ Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. ² Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

³ So He told them this parable, saying, ⁴ "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

This morning, as we think about the Lord's loving concern for those who have wandered away, I want to make four observations based on what we've read here – four very basic ideas that will hopefully encourage us to actually do what the Lord wants us to do.

- I. **As we look back at this paragraph, one of the first and most obvious lessons we see in this passage is that SOULS MATTER TO GOD – in fact, EVERY SOUL IS VALUABLE. EVERY SOUL HAS VALUE.**

Notice, please, in the parable, the Lord turns the focus back on the scribes and Pharisees. In other words, this is not just a generic story about some anonymous shepherd out there somewhere, but the Lord starts by saying (in verse 4), "***What man among you....***" The parable, then, is very personal. He is talking to specific individuals here, "***What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?***" Here at the beginning, I want us to focus on the scenario here with a hundred sheep, and I want to ask: If you had sheep, how would you know that you had a hundred? And if you had a hundred, how would you know that one was missing? It seems to me that you would have to be in the habit of counting the sheep! Is that too simple? If I have a hundred sheep, for me to know one is missing, I must be doing some counting, "One, two, three, four...97, 98, 99...oh no! One of these sheep is missing!" I think about the work some of us do up at Bible camp in the summer. If you've ever served on staff, then you know that one of my major concerns as director is that all of the campers are accounted for. Multiple times every day, then, I ask the various counselors and team leaders whether all of their campers are accounted for. When we get together in the morning, "Younger girls? Younger boys? Older girls? Older boys?" And I need to make eye contact and hear an answer from each of those four head counselors. Sometimes a kid will chime in, "Yeah, we're all here." But you know, I need to

hear it from the “shepherd” of each cabin, so to speak. I need to hear it from the one who is responsible. When we get together for team activities, when we get together for lunch, when we get together for dinner, when we get together for our evening worship – all through the day we constantly check our numbers. And if our numbers are off, then we know we need to stop what we’re doing and take care of it. In the same way, the only way a shepherd knows that one sheep out of a hundred is missing is by counting. If I have 100 \$1 bills in my wallet, the only way I know one is missing is by counting.

Now, to many of us, to lose one out of a hundred of something is not necessarily a big deal. We might think that a wealthy shepherd might just write that off, “Well, one out of a hundred isn’t too bad. That’s just the cost of doing business. After all, I still have 99.” Jesus, though, says that this shepherd is concerned about every sheep. This is not like a college exam. In my opinion, 99% is pretty good. I’d be thrilled with 99%. Not so with God. God is not satisfied knowing that one out of a hundred is lost, because every soul is valuable.

And I would also point out that in the next two parables in this chapter, the percentage grows. Have we thought about that? Right here we’re talking about one out of a hundred. The next parable is about a woman who loses one out of her ten coins. And the next parable is about a man who loses one out of his two sons. And the point of each parable is the same: No matter what is lost, the main character in each parable goes looking for it! And over all, the main reason for this is that EVERY SOUL IS VALUABLE. Remember: The scribes and the Pharisees were upset that Jesus was spending time reaching out to sinners. The Lord responds, though, with these three parables teaching the lesson: Every soul is valuable! It would be like us getting ready for bed at the end of the day and realizing that one of our children is missing. Hopefully none of us would say, “Well, you know, one out of two is not bad! Only one of my children is missing. Only one of my children is locked outside in the darkness.” We would never say that. And the same thing goes for if we were to have ten children or a hundred children. In the same way, God is not content with just a few, he is not even content with many, but he wants everybody to be saved. No matter the percentage, the shepherd misses the ONE who is lost. There is no sheep that the Good Shepherd is willing to just let go, or give up on, or hand over. The Good Shepherd is torn up over the one who is lost and will not rest until he finds it. Every soul is important to God.

Do we see how this applies to us today? Do we see how this applies to the request turned in by one of our members? “Caring enough to communicate loving concern to others.” We will never adequately communicate that loving concern until we understand, as God does, that every soul is important, that every soul has value. Souls matter to God, and souls must matter to us as well. As I have said before, I would encourage you to go home and take some time to pray through your copy of the church directory. Pay attention to those souls who are missing. Yesterday afternoon, I took a few minutes to flip through our latest directory, and I counted all of those souls that are listed – not just actual members, but every name in there, including the families and young children. You know how many I counted? 96 – 96 people who in some way are connected to the Four Lakes congregation. When even one is missing, we need to have the same concern Jesus had here, because souls matter to God.

II. As we go back to our text in Luke 15, we see a second basic idea in this paragraph as we have a reminder that SHEEP HAVE A TENDENCY TO WANDER.

Sheep have a way of wandering off and getting lost. And unlike the coin that was lost because of someone’s carelessness, and unlike the son who willingly stomped off in a huff, the sheep in this parable simply drifted. There is no indication in this passage that the sheep was mistreated by the rest of the flock. As far as we know, this particular sheep did not want to be lost. Instead, it simply wandered away, eating as it went, just quietly looking for something better – wandering. Sheep have a way of doing that. Looking down at the ground, they

go from patch of grass to patch of grass until they suddenly realize that they are in some serious trouble! Sheep, in fact, have been known to eat their way right off the edge of a cliff.

And as most of us know, sheep have no real defense against predators. They have no fangs, no horns, they don't have giant claws, no venom, there is no hard shell (like that of a turtle), there are no quills (like a porcupine), there is no great speed to outrun a predator, but they just eat themselves out into the middle of nowhere until they are suddenly a tasty meal for some other creature...and there is nothing they can do about it. Sheep are not generally vicious creatures. As far as I know, we don't have too many sports teams with sheep as mascots. We can hardly imagine the UW Sheep or the Green Bay Lambs. Sheep are not really intimidating creatures. They tend to wander and end up in trouble.

We see the same thing happening today in a spiritual sense. The Bible says that we as Christians are sheep. And even today, people have a way of snacking their way right out of God's church – a little nibble here and there – drinking, the pleasures of this life, a good job, activities, sports for the kids, a good education, a little less Bible study, a little less prayer, a little less Christian fellowship, and before we know it, we're stuck on some boulder somewhere, and we have no idea how we got there.

We think of what the prophet said in Isaiah 53:6, ***"All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way."*** Thinking that life will be so much better "out there" somewhere, we tend to wander. We tend to drift, nibbling here and there until we're gone. And once we're gone, there is often guilt – guilt over how we left, guilt over what we did while we were away – and over time, it gets more and more difficult to find our way back. And unlike some other animals, sheep have no sense of direction. Dogs and cats will sometimes find their way back home. Sheep, though, wander and have no clue where they've gone or how they got there or how to get back. And that is about where we are. This is why we need a shepherd. The shepherd leads us and keeps us safe. But the point here is: Sheep wander. They wander just like we do.

III. As we go back to our passage in Luke 15, we see another basic concept in this paragraph; the lesson here comes from the shepherd himself, and the lesson is: MAKE THE EFFORT.

Once he realizes that a sheep is missing, a good shepherd will do something. A good shepherd will make the effort. And I know I've been saying that a "good shepherd" will do these things, but I probably need to widen that up a little bit. Remember: At the beginning of this parable, Jesus was speaking to the scribes and the Pharisees, and he said, ***"What man among you..."*** wouldn't do this? In other words, this is something that all of us need to be doing. And the question here is: Who among us, if we had 100 sheep and noticed one is missing, wouldn't drop everything to go out looking for it? The right answer, the assumed answer here is: All of us would go out looking. All of us would drop everything and would spare no effort. If the family dog goes missing, we all go out looking. And if we would do that for a dog or a sheep, wouldn't we do it for a Christian brother or Christian sister? We would certainly do it for a member of our physical family. If somebody in my family doesn't show up for dinner one night, we don't just go on as if nothing is wrong, but we would tear the world apart trying to figure out where they are. We would trace routes to the bus stop, we would make calls, we would call the authorities, there would be an Amber Alert issued, we would put up posters, we would post on social media, we would be out there on radio and television. We would not rest until the lost have been found.

In a similar way, the man in the parable, then, did not just sit around waiting, but he made an effort. He went out looking. And as he searched, we can be sure that the shepherd went searching in places where he never normally would have gone - up into the hills, into the valleys, across streams, looking carefully in every gorge

and canyon. We think of what the Lord Jesus actually did, traveling right up through the middle of Samaria, a land where Jews did not go – but he did this to connect with a Samaritan woman who was coming to get water at the well (John 4). We think about the Lord changing his plans one day so that he could eat in the home of Zaccheus. And this is the Lord’s entire life. He came to seek and save that which is lost (Luke 19:10). If Jesus were concerned for his own comfort, he would have stayed in heaven; but because he loved us so much, he came here, where he was not comfortable. He came here for us. In the same way, we go looking for others, even when it might make us uncomfortable.

And with Jesus, there was a sense of urgency in this parable. The shepherd knows that when a sheep goes missing, time is of the essence. That defenseless animal is out there on its own. There is no time to spare. Did you notice the action in verse 4? Any reasonable person would **“go after”** a lost sheep until it is found. Time is critical. A lost sheep is basically a dead sheep, unless it is found quickly. By the way, when the Lord refers to the sheep being **“lost,”** he uses the same word that Peter will go on to use later in 2 Peter 3:9, **“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”** The word **“perish”** here is the same word Jesus uses for the **“lost”** sheep in Luke 15.

And this urgency is tied to the value we place on what is lost. If I mention that a quarter fell out of my pocket somewhere between my car and the front door this morning, we might have a few kids look for it on their way out this afternoon. But if I say a hundred dollar bill fell out of my pocket, some of you might just get up and leave right now. The difference is the value. One is worth searching for. We search for what we value. In the same way, when we value a soul just as the Lord does, we make the effort. We go out searching. We call. We visit. We come up with a plan. And we do not stop until the lost have been found. Let us not call off the search before anybody goes out looking!

As we think about searching here, as we think about following the example in this parable, let us not get discouraged. Sometimes it is easy to get overwhelmed. So I would suggest at least starting somewhere. Pray for a lost friend or member of the family, and then decide to do something. Think about our own church directory. Make a point of reaching out to at least one person this week – maybe someone not here this morning. Reach out and let them know that they are missed. Reach out and encourage them to return. As the request for today’s lesson was written: Caring enough to communicate loving concern for others. This passage teaches that. We are to make an effort.

IV. As we go back to Luke 15, we see another big lesson that ties in to today’s request, and the lesson is: WHEN THE LOST SHEEP IS FOUND, REJOICE!

Notice what happens here: The text says, **“When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!’”** We do not see any scolding here. We do not see any punishment. We don’t see a massive guilt trip for all of the effort and worry that went into the search. There are no “I told you so’s.” There is no name-calling. But instead, the shepherd carries the sheep home on his shoulders rejoicing, and when he gets home he has everybody over for a huge party, a celebration.

And to make sure the scribes and Pharisees understand what this parable is really about, the Lord drives it home in verse 7, **“I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”** And he doesn’t even leave it there, but he goes on to tell two more parables with the same message – the woman who loses one of ten

coins, tears the house apart to find it, and calls her neighbors over to celebrate, and then the young man who demands his inheritance early, blows it on wild living, comes to his senses, comes home and is embraced by his father who throws a huge party celebrating his return. We know what the Lord is talking about here. Most of us have found something we've been looking for, and we know the sense of relief. About a month ago, we got home at about 10 o'clock on a Wednesday night, and as we were getting out of the car, our daughter realized that she had lost her cell phone. Have you ever been there? We retraced her steps and drove all the way back over here, about half an hour each way. And when we got here, there it was, an i-Phone lying right out in front of this building on the sidewalk. We were pretty happy about that. And if we are happy about a phone, then we should be so much happier about a soul!

By the way, we have a rather famous sheep on the wall up here. This is Shrek the sheep who wandered off from the rest of his flock in New Zealand and wasn't found for six years. For six years, Shrek the sheep hid in caves to avoid being captured. You've heard of Merino wool – this is Marino. The fleece weighed in at an amazing 60 pounds. Shrek became a national icon. The shearing took place on national television, and he was eventually taken to parliament to meet the Prime Minister. You know his shepherd was happy. But you know that Shrek was pretty happy as well. That's a lot of weight to be carrying around all those years. The point of all of this is: Lost souls, like sheep, are worth searching for. They are worth finding. They are worth rejoicing over.

Conclusion:

As we close, we have a challenge: When a sheep goes missing, we can ignore it, or we can do something about it. The Lord wants us to do something about it. There is no secret to this, other than showing compassion; or, as the request for today's lesson put it, "Caring enough to communicate loving concern for others."

The good news for all of us is that Jesus is the Shepherd, and he has been looking for us since before the beginning of time. He came to this earth and offered his life on the cross. He is, as Bill read for us in our scripture reading this morning, the ***"Shepherd and Guardian of our souls"*** (1 Peter 2:25). He doesn't trick us or trap us into following, but he gives an invitation to follow, an invitation that we are passing along today from the word of God. If there is something that is holding you back, I would love to talk with you about that this morning. If we can pray with you about something, we would invite you to write it down if you can, and bring it to the front in just a moment. Let us know. The good news is that Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, and he was raised up on the first day of the week. We respond to that sacrifice by making an appeal for a good conscience. We call out to God in the act of baptism. We turn away from sin and we allow ourselves to be buried with Christ in water so that our sins can be forgiven. We are then ***"raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised [Jesus] from the dead"*** (Colossians 2:12). If you want to talk about it, pull one of us aside after the service. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com