

Loving the Lost with Abandon

Luke 15:1-7

(Count out 99 people and have them stand up. Then pick out 1 and ask this question) Which group is most important? Which group is the most valuable? In the economics of the world, it's the ninety-nine. Insurance professionals will get out their actuarial tables and tell you that you have a whole lot more to lose with the 99 than you do the 1. The old proverb says a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Spock in Star Trek said it this way, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." Obviously the 99 are more important and more valuable. (Go ahead and sit down.)

We're in the third week of a series called Kingdomnomics where Jesus turns the economics of the world on its head. He takes what our world says is valuable and important and says, "No, it isn't." And he takes what our world neglects and overlooks, and says, "This is of great value and worth. This is worth your time. This is worth your money. This is worth your investment. This is worth your life."

That's exactly what Jesus does here. He says the one is worth enough to leave the 99 and to hunt high and low until you find the 1 and bring them back. How could Jesus ever say the one is worth leaving the 99? This is the astounding mathematics of grace.

What do you do when you lose your keys, your wallet, your cell phone, your wedding ring or something important to you? You look for it, right? As soon as you discover its missing, your priorities suddenly change. You abandon everything else until you find it. Terry, from what you posted on Facebook, you know a little bit about this, right? Anyone have a metal detector? You found the rings though, right? Everything else comes to a standstill, and you turn everything upside down until you find it. You will quit what you're doing. You will put off important projects. You might even cancel appointments until you find your keys, your wallet, your ring. In that moment that it's lost, it becomes the most important thing to you. That's how God feels about lost people. That's how God feels about you when you are broken off from Him. Jesus loves the lost with abandon. If that's the way God feels about those who don't know him, how do you think we should feel?

Let me put this story in proper context for you. Jesus is telling this story to Jewish religious leaders, to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. They were criticizing him for letting tax collectors and sinner sit in on his teaching, instead of turning them away. The religious leaders were fond of putting people into categories. There were those who were loved and blessed by God, and those who were not. There was the clean and unclean, the righteous and sinners. Sinners were the people God had written off. He didn't care for them. He didn't love them. Among this group were the very tax collectors and "sinners" that were listening to Jesus teach. The teachers of the law would never stoop so low as to

teach these people, because God had nothing to say to them anyway. If God didn't care for them, they reasoned, why should they?

They even had a saying, "Let a man never associate with a wicked person, not even for the purpose of bringing him near to the law of God."ⁱ

And Jesus comes along and tells this story that turns their logic on its head. The very thing you think is worthless, Jesus says, is worth most in God's eyes. This parable was Jesus' way of telling the Pharisees and teachers of the law the value of every person. Jesus is declaring for us the tremendous mercy and patience of a loving God and Father.

Even the casting of the shepherd as the main character in the story is a brilliant move. According to the way the Pharisees and teachers of the law categorized people, shepherds were on the same level as tax collectors and sinners. They were unclean. One Rabbi writes, "In the whole world you find no occupation more despised than that of the shepherd." They were considered thieves and were not allowed to provide testimony in court. Jesus tells this story in a way that casts the Pharisees and teachers as the shepherd. "*Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep...*" He puts them in the sandals of the shepherd, on the same level as the people they say God doesn't love.

In so doing, he teaches them, the sinners who are listening to this exchange, and those of us reading it here this morning three very important things about how God values lost people, and how He loves them with abandon.

I. Just like the Shepherd, God takes the initiative in finding lost people.

First, just like the shepherd, God takes the initiative in finding lost people. The shepherd LEAVES the 99. He GOES after the lost sheep. He SEARCHES until he finds it. The shepherd is the one who is taking the initiative. The shepherd doesn't say, "I hope the sheep finds its way back. I'll keep my eyes open, hopefully we'll come across the lost sheep. If the lost sheep comes back, I'll give it all the care and food it needs." No, the shepherd goes and looks for the sheep. The sheep is important enough to the shepherd that he is willing to leave the 99 and go on a search and rescue mission to find the sheep. He takes the initiative.

He doesn't blame the sheep. "Stupid sheep. Always wandering off like that. Why doesn't he just stay with the flock. Why didn't he just stay within the sound of my voice. It's his own dumb fault he got lost." All of those things might have been true, but the shepherd still took the initiative to go find the sheep. The shepherd made the first move. He didn't wait for the sheep to do something first.

In the same way, God takes the initiative to search for and rescue sinners. God is the one who makes the first move to find lost people. The early church understood this parable to be referring to the

fact that God sent his only Son as one of us to die for our sins, and to provide a way back to our Father while we were still sinners. Romans 5:8 says, *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* This may even be hinted at in the text, for when the shepherd finds the sheep, “he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.” You cannot read that and not think of the cross that was laid upon his shoulders, the cross upon which he carried our sins, and died for every wrong thing we will ever do. God doesn’t wait for you to make the first move. He’s already come looking for you.

God didn’t stop making the first move when He sent His Son. He makes the first move today. He first loved us. Before we ever loved Him, He was already loving us. According to Romans 2:4 His kindness leads us to repentance. He intercedes and intervenes in our lives and saves us from our own foolishness. He gives us second chance after second chance. He places one or more of His people in our lives who continue to love us no matter how unlovely we are sometimes.

Question: Those of you who are married, or are in a committed relationship— who said “I love you” first? Was it you or your spouse? When you finally drummed up the courage to finally say those magical words, did they reciprocate right away? Or did they say something like, “Of course you do. Now, please pass the ketchup.” There is nothing more awkward than telling you someone “I Love you,” and to hear nothing but crickets in reply. When it comes to our relationship with God, he was the first one to declare his love for you. 1 John 4:10 says, *“this is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”*

For some of us God made the first move in your life by placing you in a loving Christian home. For some of us He made the first move through our children. Others of us first felt God’s love reaching out to us through a friend or someone we work with. God reached out to some of us through a book or a complete stranger who made a difference in our lives. Maybe God is reaching out to you right now. God is making the first move in your life at this very moment. He’s been searching, and no matter how far and wide you’ve run, He’s kept looking for you, and you can feel Him reaching out in love for you this morning. God loves us with abandon. He goes all out to reach you even if you don’t love Him back.

It doesn’t make sense for God to waste time on one sheep, and yet he does. That the shepherd would leave the 99 to go find one lost sheep seems like such upside down economics, unless you’re the one. And this is something we all need to remember this morning. We were all the one. Every single one of us at some point in our lives were the one God went looking for. We were lost. We were trapped. We were wandering. We were hurt. We were broken, and God came looking for us. God took the initiative in finding us while we were lost.

II. Just like the Shepherd, God rejoices greatly when the lost are found.

Secondly, just like the shepherd, God rejoices greatly when the lost are found. The story doesn't end when the shepherd finds the sheep, for that's when the rejoicing begins. When the shepherd finds the sheep, his face widens in an ear to ear grin. Delight drives the weariness of the search from his eyes, and joy fills his heart. As he hoists the sheep on his shoulders, the physical burden of carrying him home is feather-light compared to heavy weight of his being lost. He walks back to the flock with lightness in his step and eagerness in his pace.

Think of that joy you feel after spending hours or even days looking for your wallet, your phone, your keys, and you finally find it. You are ready to sing and dance and kiss the first living thing you see, even if it's your dog. Years ago I lost my wedding ring. I searched everywhere. I moved furniture. I got down on my hands and knees. I searched places three and four times, and never found it. We finally gave up. I felt devastated. I felt like I let Teresa down. Two years later, I was sorting through some Bible costumes at church getting ready for VBS. I took a robe out of the storage container and guess what fell out? My ring. It had been in there since VBS two years before. I couldn't believe it. I was so happy. I called my wife. We went out for dinner. It was time for celebration.

When the shepherd and the whole flock of 100 return home, it is time for a party. He calls together all his friends and neighbors for a big shindig. *"Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."* His rejoicing is so great; he wants to share it with others.

This is about more than just the joy of finding lost things. It is a glimpse into the heart of God who rejoices over finding lost lives, and wants to share that joy. This is a picture of what it's like in heaven when just one lost person responds to the love of God. In verse 7 Jesus says, *"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."* In verse 10, Jesus says, *"I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

Think about that for a moment. There was a party in heaven, when you came to Christ. When you first became convicted of your sin, and tears of sorrow fell from your eyes, God smiled, and He pointed down so all the angels would see, "Look," He said, "It's happening. This is the moment we've been waiting before." When you bowed your head in prayer, millions of angels' wings fluttered in excited anticipation. When you walked down the aisle the myriads of angels chattered eagerly. When you went under the baptismal waters a hush fell across the companies of angels as their mouths fell open. And when you came up out of the waters to walk in newness of life, all of heaven erupted in jubilant celebration. It was party time!

A question we've got to ask ourselves is how do we respond when lost people are found? Not just how we feel when they receive Christ as their Lord and Savior and are baptized into Christ; we are all about that. But how do we respond when we find them in their mess, when we find them hurting and broken, we find them and they are stuck in a really bad place? Are we like the shepherd or are we like the religious leaders? The problem with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law was they were not joyful when these sinners drew near to Jesus to hear about God. They weren't excited they might hear the truth and the truth would set them free. Instead, they were filled with anger and fear and suspicion that Jesus and his band of sinners might upset their little club.

Too many times over the years I've heard Christians who sound a whole lot more like the Pharisees when a sinner comes near the truth. There is anger and fear and suspicion. "What will others think when they see that type of person here? I'm not coming as long as they're around. They might mess up the paint and the carpet."

Do we want a youth group that's just good church kids, or do we want a group that welcomes the broken, the hurting and the lost? Do we want classes and small groups of good Christian families who have the appearance of having everything together, or do we welcome those with broken lives? This leads us right to the final lesson of this parable.

We wrestled with this very question at my last church. Our youth pastor, Thomas, was doing a great job reaching some of the skater and emo kids. Those of us with "good church kids" weren't so comfortable with this. We weren't so sure we wanted those types of kids hanging out with ours. What do the 99 do when the one comes back? They still hurt. They still have wounds. They're not sure where they fit in. Jesus reminds us here that if we're the 99, we need to celebrate when one comes home.

It doesn't make sense for God to throw a party for the one sheep who caused so much pain in getting lost, yet he does. We don't want to be like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son later in this chapter. In that story, a lost son comes home and the father throws a big party. The older brother who never wandered off misses the party because he's fussing and fuming about how he didn't get a party. The father reminds him, *"you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."* God invites us to share in the joy of heaven when we welcome a sinner home. Let us not fear what we might risk losing here on earth, but rejoice over what is gained in heaven.

III. Just like the Shepherd, God is not content with those he has.

Just like the shepherd, God is not content with those he has. He always wants to find one more. One more. The one who is lost is as valuable as those who are "found."

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. – 2 Peter 3:9

Finding the lost sheep is so important to the shepherd that he is willing to leave ninety-nine in open country while he searches. It doesn't mean he doesn't love those sheep. He'd go looking for any one of them too. But it is a calculated risk. He leaves them in the open country. The open country is not a place of immediate danger. They aren't on the edge of a cliff, or in the midst of dangerous terrain. They have food. The flock can see any danger approaching from a ways off. However, there is no guarantee of safety. There is nothing to keep one of them from wandering off. There is no one to protect them should a wild beast come looking for an easy meal. There is no security from a thief who might be looking to add to his own flock. That's how important it is to the shepherd to find the lost sheep.

In terms of worldly economics, we long for some sort of explanation to justify the shepherd's recklessness for leaving the ninety-nine. Surely there was something important about this sheep. Maybe, it belonged to someone else, and he would be in trouble if he lost it. There is a false gospel, called the *Gospel of Thomas* that was written by one of the several cults that rose up in the wake of the early growth of the church. The *Gospel of Thomas* retells this parable, but it does so in a way to rationalize the shepherd's action.

Jesus said: The kingdom is like a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of them went astray; it was the largest. He left the ninety-nine and sought for the one until he found it. After he had exerted himself, he said to the sheep, I love you more than the ninety-nine.

Notice the slight twisting of the teaching here. This is what false teaching does. It takes the truth and twists just a little, but just enough to turn it into something different. In this false gospel, the shepherd only goes after it because it's the favorite. It's the best. But there's nothing in Jesus' words in the gospels to indicate there was anything special about this sheep, nothing except for the fact that it was lost, and needed to be found.

It doesn't make sense for God to ask you to invest your time, your talent, and your treasure in seeking the lost, yet he wants you to do just that! In kingdom economics, even one lost person is worth an all-out effort. The shepherd isn't like an insurance agent looking at his actuarial tables deciding if one lamb is really worth the risk of leaving 99. That's not how God measures the value of your soul and your life. Jesus loves the lost with abandon, and so should we. What are we willing to abandon to love the lost?

The existence of the ninety-nine sheep offers no excuse for not searching for the one that is lost. Protecting and preserving what we have can never become a reason for not reaching out to save others.

We cannot become so focused on ourselves that we forget why Jesus put us here. Our purpose needs to be the same as his– to seek and save the lost.

We cannot become an inwardly focused group whose primary concern are our own wants and interests. That’s how the Pharisees got where they were. They missed the heart of God, so when God made his big move to love the lost world with abandon through his Son, Jesus, they missed out. Let’s not miss it when God moves. Let’s not miss the heart of God for the lost. Let us love the lost with abandon. Let his heart be ours. Let us not be content to just sit around and wait for whatever lost soul might wander in. Let us not be content, to tell the lost of the world to “come.” But let us do what the shepherd did, what God did, what Jesus did, what he’s called us to do, and go. Let us go and search for the lost. Let us go and find the lost. Let us go and love the lost. Let us go and pick them up in whatever way we can and bring them home.

ⁱ Snodgrass, Klyne. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2008. 101. Print.