

Loving Like Jesus—Week 1—Hopeful Love

You may be wondering why we have a table set at the front of our auditorium. This is going to be our visual cue throughout this series— a reminder of what it's all about. Our series, and our Scripture for this morning begins with a meal. A group of people have come to Jesus and Jesus is eating with them.

In Jesus' day, there were rules about who you ate with. For instance, one rule was that like eats with like. You only ate with those in the same social class as you. You didn't eat up unless you had something to offer, and you didn't eat down unless you had something to gain. This led to the rule of reciprocity. If you ate with someone from whom you could gain something, they expected something in return. You were expected to return the favor. A third rule stated that students of the learned should not recline at the same table as people of the soil. Those who earned their living with knowledge didn't eat with those who earned their keep with manual labor.

But Jesus broke all of these rules. Let's look at Luke 15:1,2:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Notice that lost people had a magnetic attraction to Jesus. They wanted to be near him. They wanted to spend time with him. They wanted to hear what he had to say. These are people who were so good at sinning it was their nickname. They were called tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors were seen as traitors. These were people who sold out their own countrymen to serve their Roman oppressors. They collected exorbitant taxes for Rome and lined their own pockets by stealing a little extra from their fellow Jews for themselves.

Sinners were everyone else that didn't measure up to the religious expert's idea of what a godly Jew should be. They ran the gamut from everyone who didn't follow all of their religious rules to prostitutes. These are the kind of people who wanted to hang out with Jesus. They were drawn to him. Why? Because Jesus loved them.

Over these next eight weeks we're going to be looking at how Jesus loved lost people. This is a series we're calling *Loving Like Jesus*. This is a series I've been working with 36 other churches. We're doing this because we believe God is calling us as church, as his people, as kingdom to love lost people like Jesus loved lost people.

Lost people were drawn to Jesus because he loved them. This offended the religious leaders. Now, who were these religious leaders? The Pharisees were a group of Jews who had devoted themselves to a strict observance of the Law of Moses. They were regarded by most in their culture to be the most spiritual. Teachers of the law were experts in the written law. They studied not only the law of Moses but all of the various interpretations that had been handed down by respected rabbis over the centuries. They taught in schools and synagogues, and they were regarded as the final authority when it came to religious questions.

In verse 2 *the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* They meant this as an accusation, an insult. That Jesus welcomed and ate with sinners did not fit their idea of what a spiritual person should do. Jesus was breaking all the rules. It was their rules that kept the sinners separate from these religious people, and it was this separation that allowed them to feel like they were better. Do we have any unwritten rules of our own that keep people separate from us, rules that allow us to think we're better than them?

The text says they muttered. Muttering is the opposite of love. Muttering is what you do when you open that Christmas tie from your mother-in-law. Muttering is resentful. Muttering flows out of a bitter heart. Muttering is the native language of a sad soul.

Jesus overhears their muttering insult and throws it in their face. He tells three stories- three parables- that explain why he welcomes sinners. He talks about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and two lost sons, and with these three stories Jesus lays for us a vision of why we need to love and welcome sinners. We need to love with a hopeful love- a love that gives hope no matter where they are lost, no matter how they got lost, no matter how badly they are lost. We will draw people to Jesus when we love them with a love that gives hope. We are to be a church that gives people hope.

Let's look at the first of Jesus' stories- The parable of the lost sheep. Luke 15:3-8

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And 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 that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven

over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

I. Parable of the Lost Sheep--There is hope when we lose our way.

I've never been around sheep except for short visits to a petting zoo, but I've read that sheep are not very smart. A part of this is sheep are slaves to a herd mentality. Back in 2005 a sheep in Turkey walked off a cliff killing itself. He was followed over the edge by the rest of the herd while their shepherds watched in horror. Fifteen hundred sheep committed mass sheep suicide. Sheep don't think very well for themselves, so a shepherd who has a sheep wander off by itself knows that he must act quickly or the sheep may be killed.

People can be a lot like sheep. We will follow the herd even if the herd's doing something stupid. There's a reason we now have the term "sheeple." How else to you explain the Tide Pod challenge, rioting when you don't know what you're protesting, Bitcoin bubbling to a value of \$19,000 when it's back by \$0 in real assets? It's a herd mentality. Several years ago a bunch of people lined up outside of Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood five weeks before the premier of *Star Wars: Episode III—Revenge of the Sith*.ⁱ One after another they took their place in line and set up their tents to begin the long wait for the premiere. They came from as far away as Australia. Problem was, they were lining up at the wrong theater.

Even those of us who pride ourselves in being independent just follow a different herd. You ever notice how non-conformists all look alike. Whether its hipsters, goths, rappers, bikers, red-necks, or emos, they're just all different herds doing their own thing just like each other. I have no doubt that this affects us spiritually and morally.

It's no accident that Jesus compares us to sheep. In Jesus' first parable in Luke 15, a shepherd loses a sheep—or should we say a sheep loses his shepherd? With what we know about sheep, it seems safe to assume that the sheep in this story gets lost because of his own foolishness. Maybe the sheep was captivated with a flower or too focused on nibbling on a tuft of grass or distracted in some other way.

He wasn't trying to get lost. Regardless, the sheep ended up not being where he was supposed to be. Have you ever ended up lost without meaning to? On January 12, Tara Guertin lent her Jeep to three friends from Connecticut who wanted to do some sightseeing in Burlington, VT.ⁱⁱ It turned out to be a foggy, rainy morning as her friends

drove around. Because of the fog, they didn't know their GPS app led them right down a boat ramp into Lake Champlain.

The driver had done nothing wrong. He wasn't drunk, and after the SUV sank to the bottom of the lake, the GPS app still showed the wrong course. Sometimes our spiritual GPS just gets messed up and sends our lives the wrong way. Maybe it's the way you were raised. Maybe it's the friends you hang out with. Maybe it's a wrong turn you took years ago, and your spiritual GPS has been recalculating ever since.

After the sheep gets lost, the shepherd does something shocking that shows us the heart of God for lost people. Those of you who've been in church all your lives, pretend that you've never heard this story before. Think of how shocking it is that the shepherd was so intent on finding the lost sheep that he leaves the ninety-nine other sheep in the open country to go and look for him. Jesus leaves the 99 in the open field. Why? They're not lost!

Most churches today have the mentality that the shepherd should simply care for the needs of the 99. But that's not what this passage teaches. When the shepherd in Jesus' parable was reunited with his sheep, he didn't punish the sheep for making a bad choice. Sometimes shepherds, if they had a sheep that frequently strayed, would break one of their legs to keep the sheep closer to the shepherd, but not on this occasion with this sheep. No, this was a time for joyful celebration, so the shepherd joyfully put the sheep on his shoulders.

I want you to know that if you've just lost your way, there is hope for you in Jesus Christ. Let's look at the next parable. Luke 2:8-10

⁸ "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

II. Parable of the Lost Coin--There is hope when we get lost because of neglect.

This lost coin's value wasn't in its worth. Each coin was worth only about a day's wages. Its worth was in its sentimental value. This wasn't pocket change she'd set on her dresser and knocked one off. Archaeologists and historians tell us these silver coins were a part of her dowry. When she got married, she would have taken these coins and sewn

them into her headdress which she wore on her wedding day. This was like losing a wedding ring.

Unlike the sheep, this coin did not wander off. It was lost due to some carelessness or neglect on the woman's part. The text does not specify the reason, but we know the coin didn't lose itself. Maybe there was some sort of accident, but permit me to read between the lines here. When I lose my wedding ring, or something of sentimental value, it's usually because I'm not being careful like I should. So, let's assume the coin was lost due in some part to the neglect of this woman. Desperate to find her coin, the woman lit a lamp, swept the house, and searched until she found it. She moved everything in the house to find that coin, and when she did she was so happy that she called her friends and neighbors together and said, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin" (Luke 15:9).

How many people are lost because of some neglect on our part? We have to be more careful. In Nazi Germany during World War II, there was a small group of Christian Germans who enjoyed their weekly worship. They enjoyed the preaching, the singing, and the fellowship, everything except the railroad track that brought noisy trains right behind the church. The noise was always distracting, but one Sunday it became disturbing. As the train passed by, the worshipers heard cries coming from the train. They eventually realized that these were the cries of Jews being carried away to concentration camps. Week after week the train whistle blew and the Christians heard the tracks rattle . . . and then the cries.

Disturbed by the screams, the Christians decided as a congregation that the only thing to do was to sing hymns. They would sing so loud that they couldn't hear the cries of the desperate Jews being carried to their deaths. The cries were loud, but the hymns were louder. Nothing changed, but those Christians felt better when they ignored the world around them. We must not ignore the lost people in the world around us.

George Barna estimates there are between 180–190 million people who are not born-again Christians in America. Can you get your mind around how many people that is? Let me try to help you. Arrowhead stadium in Kansas City holds 76,416 people. You could fill 2,486 Arrowhead stadiums with all the lost sheep in the United States. If you combined the population of Mexico and the Philippines, you'd equal the number of lost people in the U.S. right now.

Imagine there's a huge fire coming toward this country and that everyone who wants to get out safely must come to you. If you could save 1,000 people a day, it would take you 521 years to save 190 million people. Good news: you don't have to save 190 million people by yourself. Bad news: there is a fire coming (2 Peter 3:7).

Good news: there is still time to help people to get out safely. Bad news: too many Christians are doing absolutely nothing to reach anyone for Jesus.

Good news: If you and I agree to stop neglecting lost people and we each find one lost person for Jesus next year, there would be two new Christians at the end of next year. If each of those formerly lost people finds another lost person in the next year, there would be four new Christians by the end of the next year. If this process continues, there would be eight new Christians by the end of the third year. If this process continues for the next 40 years, 1,099,511,627,776 people will become Christians, which is roughly 163 times the current world population. I say we stop singing louder and get to work . . . we have some coins to find.

Now, let's look at the last parable in Luke 15. Luke 15:11-32

11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them.

13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

III. Parable of the Lost Son--There is even hope when we willfully rebel.

Now, the younger son would receive only one-third of the family estate, while his older brother would inherit two-thirds. That was fine with him, so he took his portion and went off and squandered it in wild living. When it was all gone and he was broke and hungry, he turned to feeding pigs; unthinkable work for a Jew.

Finally, he came to his senses and headed for home with a repentant heart. He knew that he sinned in rebelling against his father (Luke 15:18), and he was ready to be back home, where he belonged—even if only as one of his father’s hired hands. While he was still far away, the father saw him, which tells us that his father had been watching for him all along. He was filled with compassion for his son, and the Bible says “*he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him*” (Luke 15:20).

God runs. Question: what makes us run? Answer: being late, catching a bus, fear, trying to losing weight. Question: what makes God run? Answer: lost people. I love that God is always scanning the horizon, looking for lost people to turn their face towards home. We want to be just like that. We want to always be looking in their direction and—when they turn their face towards home—just like God, we want to run like a crazed fool to meet them.

The father was so overjoyed that he threw a party. He called his servants, friends, and neighbors together and said, “Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:23, 24).

It doesn’t matter why you’re lost. It doesn’t matter what wrong turn you took. Maybe you just wandered away. Perhaps it was foolishness or rebellion on your part, or the neglect or abuse of someone else. It doesn’t matter. Jesus welcomes you at his table.

You have a heavenly father that scans the horizon every day just hoping to see you. He’s waiting that moment you turn your heart toward home, and when he sees you he will run out to welcome you with open arms, as his own son or daughter. Maybe today is that day. Will you come home?

For the rest of us, my question is this– who will sit at your table? Who will you welcome and eat with? When you came in this morning, you were given a paper plate. This plate represents the lost person you will invite at your table.

ⁱ <http://www.heraldtribune.com/news/20050412/star-wars-fans-lined-at-wrong-theater>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/nation-now/2018/01/23/waze-unable-explain-how-car-ended-up-lake-champlain/1060504001/>