

STORYTIME:
The Ones Where the Lost Get Found

Luke 15:1-10

God never gives up on us; that calls for a party!

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
Fort Smith, Arkansas
August 4, 2019

The question of the day seems to be, “Did you have a good vacation?” Thanks for asking, and yes, we had a great vacation. The first week was a beach trip, a family reunion with Carey’s family that happens every third week of July in Destin, Florida. This year we had 43 family and friends in attendance. It wasn’t very wild, but it was a celebration.

The second week was grandparent camp with our two oldest grandsons, Walker and Oliver. We had a full and active week of all kinds of activities in the River Valley and Northwest Arkansas. At ages 6 and 8, they are old enough to play board games, cards, and they are crazy about sports.

One of the games—about the only game—we *didn’t* play this week was hide-and-seek. They’ve kind of outgrown that game. The younger two grandsons will soon be getting into that. It’s still pretty much the rage with 3- and 4-year-olds. You know how it goes. Someone will count while the others hide, then the hunt begins, and eventually everyone gets found. Then you do it again. And again. And again, for a while.

One would think that with the multitude of repetition, kids would be great at hide and seek. But they’re really not. They hide in easy places. They giggle when you get close to them. It’s like they want to get found. Which of course, they do. That’s the fun part—the tag or the hug or the tickle you get when you get found.

Robert Fulghum is a former minister who has written several books of essays. In one he talks about playing hide-and-seek, remembering how he played as a child and commenting on what it’s like to watch the game from an adult perspective. As he watched a group of older kids playing hide-and-seek outside, one child came and hid in a pile of leaves right under the window where Fulghum was working. After a while, everyone else was found except the kid in the leaves. There was always that one kid who hid too well, you know? Fulghum considered going outside and telling whoever was “it” where the kid was. Then he thought about setting the leaves on fire to drive the kid out. Finally he just threw open the window and yelled, “GET FOUND, KID!” Unfortunately, it scared the child so badly he jumped up, wet his pants, started crying, and ran all the way home! Fulghum commented, “It’s real hard to know how to be helpful sometimes.”¹

The stories Jesus told are helpful in teaching us about the character of God, the nature of humanity, and the relationship between us. But it's always helpful to understand the context in which the parable is told. In the 15th chapter of Luke, Jesus is attracting a diverse audience to hear his teaching, including some non-religious types—tax collectors and sinners. The religious types, Pharisees and scribes, were upset that Jesus was so friendly with the riff-raff of society, and they complained: “*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*”² Apparently they complained loud enough that Jesus heard them, so he told them this parable.

“*Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?*” Well, the answer to this would be “Nobody.” In the first place, Jesus is telling this parable for the Pharisees and scribes, a bunch of religious leaders. Keeping sheep would have been beneath them. Shepherds were the lowest rung on the ladder of that society. They were not considered bad people, just poor, dirty, and they smelled like sheep. Even if the Pharisees did have sheep, none of them would have been stupid enough to leave 99 sheep “*in the wilderness*” to look for one lost lamb. That would have left the 99 exposed to predators and thieves. Jesus is actually being humorous here, drawing a picture that is as outlandish, risky, extravagant, and prodigal as the love of God is.

Of course, the image of God as a shepherd is not new at all. Passages in the Psalms, Isaiah, and Ezekiel all compared God to a shepherd: “*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*”³ “*He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms.*”⁴ “*For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ...I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.*”⁵ So Jesus is playing with some images that are already deep in the hearts of the people. This is the God we know—the Shepherd who seeks the lost sheep.

When the shepherd finds the lost sheep, the response is joy and celebration: “*When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’*”⁶

Then Jesus makes the application to the religious people who were listening: *“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.”*⁷ The heart of God is with the lost. That’s what really blesses God—when one of the lost sheep returns home, not when 99 religious folk turn up their noses at sinners.

So all the men in the crowd are nodding their heads at the wise sayings of Jesus, because they know all about sheep and shepherds. Then Jesus gives a more female-friendly parable, because that’s the way Jesus was, and that’s the way the Gospel of Luke tells it: *“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?”*⁸ These coins were Greek *drachmas*, the equivalent to the Roman *denarius*, both of them equal to a day’s wage for a working man. So the coin was valuable enough in itself. But the fact that there were ten of them may indicate that the coin had sentimental value. Married Jewish women in that time had headdresses made of ten silver coins held together with a silver chain. It would be the emotional equivalent of a wedding ring.⁹ If the chain broke and a coin were lost, it would be a big deal.

But the woman is persistent. She lights a lamp so she can see better in the dark room and sweeps through the straw on the dirt floor until she hears the clink of a coin. Then she calls her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her, which only makes sense when you understand just how valuable that coin was.

Jesus makes the same point with the lost coin as he made with the lost sheep: *“Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*¹⁰

These are familiar parables—the lost sheep and the lost coin. I think you probably get it. But just for fun, let’s talk about what they mean.

First of all, there is lots of lost. Lost is real. There are many ways to get lost—lost from a relationship with God, lost in the grip of a sin or an addiction, lost from a sense of meaning and purpose in your life, lost from our families, lost in the wilderness of loneliness or depression or illness or grief. There are many variations of lostness, and they’re all bad.

Yo-Yo Ma is a world famous Chinese-American cellist. One morning he got up to practice for a scheduled concert at Carnegie Hall in New York City. He called a cab, and put his 270-year-old cello, valued at \$2.5 million, in the trunk of the cab. When he reached his destination, Ma paid the driver and walked away, leaving his cello in the trunk. After the cab drove away, he realized what he had done. But it was too late; the cab had disappeared in a sea of traffic. Fortunately, Ma had the receipt from the cab fare with the driver's ID number on it, so the cab company was able to trace the vehicle. Later that afternoon, the cab was located in a garage in another part of the city, and when they opened up the trunk, the priceless cello was still in there. Yo-Yo Ma could hardly contain his joy as he retrieved his instrument; it like a lost sheep or a lost wedding coin. Fortunately, his concert performance for that night went on as scheduled.¹¹

One great thing about God is that God seeks the lost. God reaches out to us in love. This is what we call prevenient grace—the grace that goes before us. God never stops seeking; God never stops reaching out. God never gives up on us. There's no giving up in these parables. The shepherd seeks until he finds the lost lamb. The woman cleans her house until she finds the coin. God seeks until God finds what is lost.

In December of 1988, an earthquake devastated large parts of Armenia in western Asia, killing an estimated 25,000 people. In one small town, just after the earthquake, a father rushed to his son's school only to find that the school had been flattened. There was no sign of life.

But he had no thought of turning back. He had often told his son, "No matter what, I'll always be there for you." So the father scrambled over the fallen concrete to where his son's schoolroom used to be and began feverishly pulling out every rock he could move. Other parents arrived and went hysterical. Others tried to pull the father away, saying, "There is no hope! They're dead! Go home."

But the father worked on. Firefighters and police tried to send him home, but he wouldn't go. With strength and endurance from somewhere beyond himself, the loving father continued to dig...for 8 hours...12...24...36 hours. Then, 38 hours after he started his search, he pulled back a piece of rubble, and he heard voices. He screamed his son's name: "Armand!"

A child's voice responded: "Dad! It's me...Armand!" Then he said, "I told the other kids not to worry. I told them that if you were alive, you'd save me, and when you saved me, they'd be saved, too. I remembered how you promised you would always be here for me!"

So one by one, this dad helped his son Armand and 13 more frightened, hungry, thirsty boys and girls climb out of a crawlspace where the pieces of concrete had formed a wedge and had miraculously protected the children. When the townspeople praised Armand's dad, his explanation was, "I promised my son, 'No matter what, I'll be there for you!'"¹²

God never gives up on us—or on anybody. God never quits loving us. God will always be there for us. A little later in the Gospel, Jesus meets a lost soul named Zacchaeus, another one of those tax collectors, and at the end, when Zacchaeus has been saved, Jesus says, "*The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.*"¹³

The proper response to a God who seeks the lost is to rejoice, to praise, to celebrate what God has done. This is not what the Pharisees and scribes liked to see. They wanted to see some judgment. The religious people were shocked at the way Jesus mingled with and ate with and welcomed sinners. They thought there should be great joy in heaven when a sinner was obliterated by God.¹⁴ But Jesus said there is great joy in heaven when even one sinner repents and returns to God. So let the party begin. Let the celebration spill over and cover the earth. Let the joy in God's heart be the joy in our hearts when anyone who is lost in any way turns back to God—ourselves, our neighbor, our friend, our enemy—we're all welcome here.

Our mission is pretty clear, because the way God feels is pretty clear: "*The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.*"¹⁵ We need to get found. We need to rejoice over the kind of loving, gracious God we have. We need to seek others who are lost. We need to welcome everyone into the sheep fold.

Robert Fulghum had a further reflection on hide-and-seek. He compared the Kingdom to a game of "Sardines." Sardines is a variation on the game of hide-and-seek which is really a better description of God's blessed community. In Sardines, whoever is "it" runs and hides. Then everyone else goes looking for him or her. When somebody finds "it," the seeker gets

in the hiding place, too. Fulghum says, “Pretty soon everybody is hiding together, all stacked together like puppies in a pile. And pretty soon somebody giggles and somebody laughs and everybody gets found.” Then he makes this profound statement: “Me, I think old God is a Sardine player. And [God] will be found the same way everybody gets found in Sardines—by the sound of laughter from those heaped together at the end.”¹⁶

This is what the Kingdom looks like, and there is great joy in heaven when it happens on earth.

¹ Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* (New York: Ballantine-Ivy Books, 1986, 1988), 55.

² Luke 15:2.

³ Psalm 23:1.

⁴ Isaiah 40:11.

⁵ Ezekiel 34:11, 16.

⁶ Luke 15:5-6.

⁷ Luke 15:7.

⁸ Luke 15:8.

⁹ Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables From The Backside* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 20f.

¹⁰ Luke 15:10.

¹¹ *Chicago Tribune*, October 17, 1999.

¹² <https://www.crossway.org/tracts/a-fathers-love-2770/>.

¹³ Luke 19:10.

¹⁴ William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 200.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.