

Jesus was often criticized by the so-called religious leaders of His day because He associated with people that they considered sinners and unworthy. In response to their criticism, Jesus often told parables or stories in order to teach them and His disciples. In the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus gives us three stories that deal with God's deep concern and love for all of His children – the entire human race. Focusing on God's persistent love for the lost, these are the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. This morning, let's look at the first one of these parables found in verses 1 through 10 of Chapter 15. We will discuss the third story next Sunday.

Read Luke 15:1-10

Have you ever been lost; I mean really lost when you couldn't find your way – you didn't know which way to go. Last month when Judy and I were back in South Carolina, one day we drove over to our farm to check on the trees that we grow for pulpwood and saw timber. On every trip back home, I go and walk through the woods to see how much the trees have grown and if there are any signs of the dreaded pine beetles.

Several years ago, my son Ben and I were cruising the timber behind the old barn that my grandfather built in the late 1940's. Now you have to visualize the forests in South Carolina; they are a lot different than our woods here in New Mexico. We plant the pine trees every 6 to 8 feet; you are basically surrounded by trees. The trees in this section of the farm were about 25 feet high at that time and the underbrush was thick. Of course, there were snakes, mosquitoes, and humidity; it was heaven!

Well, Ben and I went to the back of the property to check on the property marker. As we started to head back towards the barn, Ben said: "Dad, you're going the wrong way; the barn is back this way." I was headed deeper into the forest onto my neighbor's property. I had grown up walking all over this farm and had even planted these trees when Ben was only two years old. But I was lost and as the Bible says so well: "And a child shall lead them."

You know we have all been lost at some time in our life. We have all felt helpless; like we didn't know which way to go. In addition, we have all felt that we are or were at one time separated from God. In our text for this morning, Jesus tells us about the lost and how important they are to Him and His Father.

Now as you read the story of the lost sheep, one of the first questions that may come to your mind is why worry about one lamb; you have 99, what's one lousy sheep? Does this one really matter? Doesn't it seem absurd for the shepherd to risk leaving the 99 sheep alone in the wilderness to go and search for one lost sheep?

However, the good, dedicated shepherd thinks it is worth the effort, even though it means leaving the 99 alone in the wilderness while he looks for the lost one. The shepherd had concern in his heart for the welfare of the lost sheep when he discovered that it was missing from his flock. Because of his concern for the sheep, and because of his love for each one, he went out into the darkness, danger and loneliness of the night, continuing his search until the lost sheep was found and restored. Once he finds the sheep, he doesn't just prod the lamb home. He picks it up, lays it across his shoulder, and carries it home as a father may carry his sleepy child into the house after a long car trip.

In the Bible, the term "shepherd" is used to describe God in both the Old and New Testaments. In our Responsive Reading from the beautiful 23rd Psalm we hear these familiar words: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still water. He restores my soul." We are the sheep of God's pasture and He watches over us. God always wants the best for each one of us.

Isaiah 40:11 tells us that the Lord tends His flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart. Ezekiel 34:11 also reaffirms this by noting that the Lord says: "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness."

In John 10:11, Jesus tells us: "I am the Good Shepherd." A couple years ago I shared with you how Max Lucado describes the difference between a cowboy and a shepherd in his book *A Gentle Thunder*. Out here in the West, the cowboy is the All American hero. However, in the Bible, the shepherd was the hero. On the surface they seem the same – both are rugged, tough, loners, live outdoors, and are in constant danger. But that is where the similarities end. The shepherd loves the sheep. It's not that the cowboy doesn't appreciate the cows; it's just that he doesn't know the animal. He doesn't even want to. Have you ever seen a picture of a cowboy caressing a cow or carrying a calf like the shepherd does a lamb, except maybe Billy Crystal in the movie *City Slickers*?

The cowboy leads the cows to slaughter; the shepherd leads the sheep to be sheared. The cowboy drives the cattle; the shepherd leads the sheep. The cowboy knows the names of the other trail hands; the shepherd knows the names of each of the sheep. The cowboy whoops and hollers at the cows; the shepherd calls each sheep by name.

Aren't you glad that Jesus didn't call Himself the Good Cowboy? When you get down to it, we need a shepherd. We don't need someone to herd us; we need a shepherd who cares for us and guides us. And we have one; one who loves us and knows each of us by name.

I don't think that I need to tell you why this is important. Like me, you have probably been in a situation where someone forgot your name. Perhaps a situation where no one knew who you were or even cared. Well, Jesus cares for all of His sheep. He knows our name, each one of us. He's not a cowboy, and we are not cattle. He doesn't brand us, and we're not on the way to the market. He guides, feeds and anoints us. He's calling each one of us by name. And Word has it that He will not quit until we reach the homeland.

Another question that we might ask is why would anyone, especially God, search or care for me? I'm not worthy; I'm beyond hope and rescue; and I'm too great a sinner. The moral of this moving parable is that the Good Shepherd will go to any length to save the lost sheep. No one is beyond His reach or unworthy of His love and attention. Unlike the Pharisees, the religious leaders of that time, who neglected those in need and were judgmental, Jesus welcomes all no matter who they are, how far they have wandered from home or how lost they think they are. The Apostle Paul summed it up well in 1 Timothy 1:15-16 when he wrote: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on Him and receive eternal life."

In Alfred Soord's painting *The Lost Sheep*, for whatever reason – curiosity, adventure, eating its way from the flock – a sheep has wandered off from the fold, fallen into danger, and is clinging to the edge of a cliff, crying for help. In the fast-approaching night, buzzards circle overhead waiting for an easy meal. The shepherd hears his lost sheep. He hangs on to the ledge with one hand and reaches down with the other to grasp the lamb. In painting this, the artist must have been reminded of the scene in Matthew 14:31 on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus reaches out and pulls the sinking Peter up to safety. Now I wonder how many children who saw this painting pictured themselves as the valiant shepherd, and then later in life saw themselves as the grateful lamb? What do you see?

The Bible is full of stories of individuals that we would consider unworthy of God's efforts to save them. Two particular ones come to mind right now; both of them played a part in the crucifixion of Jesus. The first is Judas. If there was ever a character you could despise, it was the traitor Judas. But on the very night that Jesus broke bread with His disciples, the Bible tells us that Jesus washed their feet. John 13:12 says: "When Jesus had finished washing their feet, He returned to His place at the table." Their feet, all the disciples, including the one who would betray Him before the night was over. He left no one out. In just a few hours Judas' feet would lead the guards of the High Priest and Roman soldiers to arrest Jesus. But at this very moment they are caressed by Jesus in hope that this lost sheep would return to the fold.

God never gives up. Some respond, while others remain lost like Judas. Now let's look at the thieves on the cross with Jesus on Calvary. The first criminal reads the sign that states that Jesus is the King of the Jews. He hears Jesus pray for those who are crucifying Him. Something about the presence of this carpenter and teacher convinces him that he is in the presence of a king. However, the other crook has a different opinion. "Aren't you the Christ? Then save yourself and us," he says in Luke 23:39. You would have thought that a man facing death would use his last energy for something other than slander. But not this guy; even as he was dying, he mocks Jesus. But the first thief quickly replies: "You should fear God! We are getting what we deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." He defends Jesus while Peter and the other disciples run away scared and stand at a distance from the cross. Then this lost sheep turns to Jesus and takes the final step: "Jesus remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus replies with those words that we all long to hear: "Today you will be with me in paradise."

A couple of thoughts come to mind as we close. God loves the sinner no matter what the sin. In addition, we must remember that there is no room for hopelessness in God's love. Every soul is precious. As the well-known poem by Francis Thompson points out so well: "The Hound of Heaven seeks us in our lostness until we discover Him." All the energy of heaven is released to find even one poor, wandering soul. 2 Peter 3:9 reminds us: "God is being patient with you. He does not want anyone to be lost, but He wants all people to change their hearts and lives."

In our own unique journey through life, we can become so intent on our personal desires that we do not hear the voice of God calling our name or see the hand of God reaching out for us. Yet, He is always there reaching out to us; to show us the way.

Despite how long it has been, I can still hear my son Ben saying: "Dad, you're going the wrong way; the barn is back this way." In the same way, can't you hear God saying: "Son, daughter, you're going the wrong way; home, peace, rest, and love are back this way." Have you lost your way; do you feel lost this morning?

Remember what this morning's text says; there is hope and reason to rejoice. We are never really lost, never really hopeless, because God is always out there searching for us and calling us by name to come home. You don't have to go looking for God; He's right here. All we have to do is stop running, turn around and say: "Here I am Father, lead me home."

Remember when everyone rejects you, Jesus accepts you. When everyone else leaves you, Jesus finds you. When no one else wants you, Jesus claims you. When no one else will give you the time of day, Jesus will give you the words of eternity.

With all its stories and characters, the Bible has one simple overall story. God made us; we rejected God. But God will not give up until He wins us all back. From Moses in the desert at Moab to the Apostle John on the Island of Patmos, the voice can be heard calling each one of us

to come home to our Father. If there are 1,000 steps between us and God, God will take all but the last one. The final step is left up to us. The choice is ours. God still calls out to those who are lost and God still rejoices when one single person accepts His invitation to come back home. You are never lost in the arms of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you are going the wrong way, turn around the Lord is this way! Amen