

The fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke is one of the most familiar and beloved texts in the New Testament. It has been called the “gospel in the gospel” because it contains a summary of the good news which Jesus Christ came to proclaim by His life and His teachings.

Jesus was often criticized by the so-called religious leaders of His day because He associated with people that they considered sinners and unworthy, the outcasts of society. In response to their criticism, Jesus often told parables or stories in an effort to teach His critics and His disciples how God really views His children. Jesus would take common everyday events and items that were familiar to His audience and develop a story around them to drive home His point; He was definitely a Master at telling stories. In the fifteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus gives us three stories that deal with God’s deep love and concern for all of His children – the entire human race. Focusing on God’s persistent love for the lost, these are stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Each story supports the overall theme of the Gospel of Luke: “The Son of Man came to seek and save that which was lost.” This morning, let’s look at the first of these three parables found in the first seven verses of Chapter 15.

Read Luke 15:1-7

Have you ever been lost, I mean really lost; when you couldn’t find your way – you didn’t know which way was out or which way to go. Each time Judy and I go back to South Carolina, I always visit our farm which is just outside a small town called Carlisle where I grew up. When my father was alive, we grew cotton, corn and hay, and had a small herd of cattle, but since my brother and I don’t live there anymore and are absentee landowners, we each grow timber on our individual farms. So every trip back there, I walk through the forest to see how the pine trees are doing and to check for signs of pine beetles and other problems.

Several years ago, my youngest son Ben and I were cruising the timber out behind an old barn that my grandfather had built in the late 1940’s. Now you have to visualize the forests in South Carolina; they are a little different from what we see here in New Mexico. We plant the pine trees every 6 to 8 feet apart; thus, you are basically surrounded by trees, and you can only see for about 30 to 50 feet in each direction. Of course there are also snakes, mosquitoes, and chiggers. You have never lived until you have met a chigger! It’s not heaven; it’s a living hell!

Well, Ben and I went to the back of the property behind the barn to check on the property boundary markers. As we started to head back to the barn, Ben says: “Dad, you’re going the wrong way, the barn is back this way.” I was headed in the opposite direction, deeper into the forest onto our neighbor John Frasier’s property. Now I grew up on this farm, I know every inch of it; it’s in my blood, and to top it all off, I had even planted those trees when Ben was only two years old. But I was lost; I was going in the wrong direction!

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 turn; which unfortunately many people may be experiencing right now during the coronavirus. In addition, we have all felt that we are or were at one time separated from God. In our text, Jesus tells about the lost sheep and how important it was to the shepherd. As you read this story, one of the first questions that come to mind is why worry about one lamb; you have 99 left, what's one lousy sheep? Does this one really matter so much? Doesn't it seem ridiculous for the shepherd to risk leaving the 99 sheep alone unattended in the dangerous wilderness to go and search for one lost lamb?

But the good, dedicated shepherd thinks it is worth the effort, even though it means leaving the 99 in the wilderness while he searches for the lost lamb. 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 into the darkness and danger and loneliness of the night, continuing to search until the lost lamb 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 in his arms 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 that wonderful old Psalm – the 23rd – we hear those familiar words: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the water. He restoreth my soul." We are all the sheep of God's pasture and He watches over us; He cares for each one of us. God always wants the best for us.

Isaiah 40:11 tells us that "the Lord tends His flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs into His arms and carries them close to His heart." This is reaffirmed in Ezekiel 34:11 where 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." These are wonderful words of comfort because we all have or will experience those days of clouds and darkness at some time, and feel lost, alone and confused about which way to go in life.

In John 10:11, Jesus tells us: "I am the good shepherd." In his book *A Gentle Thunder*, Max Lucado discusses the difference between a cowboy and a shepherd. Out here in the West, the cowboy is the American hero, like John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart or Clint Eastwood; while in the Bible the hero was the shepherd, like Moses and David. On the surface they seem the same - both are rugged, tough, loners, live outdoors, and are in constant danger. But this is where the similarities end. The shepherd loves the sheep; they are his pets. 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 cow like the

shepherd does a lamb, except maybe in *City Slickers* when Billy Crystal was carrying Norman the calf.

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 trail hands. The shepherd knows the names of all his sheep. The cowboy whoops and hollers at the cows; the shepherd call each sheep by name.

Aren't you glad Jesus didn't call Himself the Good Cowboy? Because I don't know about you, but I need a shepherd. We don't need a cowboy to herd and yell at us; we need a shepherd to care for us and to guide us. And we have one; one who knows each one of us by name. I don't need to tell you why this is important. Like me, you have probably been in a situation where someone forgot your name or called you somebody else. Or 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 are not on our way to the market. He guides, feeds and anoints us. He's calling each one of our names. And Word has it that He won't quit until all of us reach the homeland, heaven.

Another question that some of us may ask is why would anyone, especially God, come looking for me or even care about me? I'm not worthy; I'm beyond hope and rescue; I'm too great a sinner. One of the worst feelings in the world is to feel unloved, to feel that no one cares. The moral of this moving parable is clearly that the Good Shepherd will go to any length to save the lost sheep, especially those of us who feel unworthy. No one, no one is beyond His reach or unworthy of His love and attention.

Unlike the Pharisees back then who neglected those in need and were judgmental, Jesus welcomes all no matter who they are or how far they have wandered from home or how lost 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, or eating its way from the flock – a sheep has wandered off from the fold, fallen into trouble, and is clinging to the edge of a cliff, crying out for help. In the fast-approaching night, buzzards circle overhead waiting for an easy meal. But the shepherd finds his lost soul. He hangs on the ledge with one hand and reaches down with the other to grasp the sheep. In painting this, the artist must have been reminded of the scene in Matthew 14:31 on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus reaches down and pulls the sinking, doubting Peter up to safety. I wonder how many people

who first saw this painting as a child initially pictured themselves as that valiant shepherd rescuing the lamb, and then later in life saw themselves as that grateful lamb, being saved?

Just as the shepherd left the security of the ninety-nine to seek the one poor lamb who was lost, so did the Son of God come from the glory of heaven to seek out His lost children. This is the true heart of the Bible; this is the reason behind the manger in Bethlehem that we talk about at Christmas, and the cross at Calvary that we talk about on Easter. The Bible is full of stories of individuals that we would consider unworthy of God's efforts to save them. But God never gives up on anybody. Did you hear that – God never gives up on any of us! Some of us respond positively like the thief on the cross and Paul, and unfortunately others remain lost like Judas. The message for each of us is that it is never too late to turn back to God. God is still one sincere prayer away from forgiving and saving us.

A couple more thoughts come to mind. God loves the sinner no matter the sin. And there is no room for hopelessness in God's love. Every soul is precious to Him. 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 energy and power of heaven are 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 repent and change their hearts and lives."

In our unique journey through life, we can become so focused on our personal needs and desires that we do not hear the voice of God calling out our name or see the hand of God reaching out to us. Yet, in the very depths of our heart, there is a still, small voice that cries out for help, and there is another Divine Voice that replies: "I have found my sheep."

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 calling: "Son, daughter, you're going the wrong way, home – peace – mercy – love and grace are back this way?" Have you lost your way? Do you feel lost? Remember what our 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. You don't have to go looking for God, He's right here. All you have to do is stop running, turn around, and say – "Here I am, Father, lead me home."

With all its stories and characters, the Bible has one simple theme. God made us in His image; we rejected God, but God won't give up until He wins us back. From Moses in the desert of Moab to 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 1000 steps between us and God, He will take all but the last one. The final one is left up to us; it's our choice. God still calls out to those who are lost and God still rejoices when each one accepts His invitation to come back home again. You are never lost in the arms of the Lord Jesus. If you are going the wrong way, turn around, the Lord is this

way; He's looking for you and wants you to come home. If you have never given your life to Jesus, then open your heart and invite Him in as Rey/Lisa sings Amazing Grace. Amen