

# Finding Kingdom Joy

## Luke 15:1-10

### Introduction

On this day 21 years ago the unthinkable happened. Four coordinated suicide terrorist attacks against the United States were carried out by the militant Islamic extremist network Al-Qaeda.

On that Tuesday morning, nineteen terrorists in all hijacked four commercial airliners mid-flight. Their goal was to crash the planes into prominent American buildings in order to inflict mass casualties and cause major structural damage. Two of the four teams successfully crashed their planes into the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. A third plane hit the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. Thanks to a passenger revolt, the fourth plane crashed into a field outside of Shanksville, PA instead of hitting its assigned target.

My wife Karen was in Toronto on that day. Just before 9:00 that morning she called me and said "Turn on the TV. Something bad is happening." And like many of you, the rest of my day was spent riveted to the news. And not just that day, but for days thereafter.

The "search and rescue" teams that descended on those four sites hoped for the best, of course, but they knew the likelihood of good news was slim. In all, the attacks resulted in 2,977 fatalities, over 25,000 injuries and substantial long-term health consequences, in addition to at least \$10 billion in infrastructure and property damage.

Amid all that tragedy, there were a few occasions for celebration. One of the survivors of that dreadful day was the owner of this pair of boots, currently on display at the September 11 Memorial in New York City. Port Authority Police Sergeant John McLoughlin was one of only 18 people to emerge from the wreckage of the twin towers.

He was leading a small group of people through the underground plaza between the two towers when the South Tower came down, burying them beneath 30 feet of twisted, burning rubble. A Marine heard their faint cries for help. It took 22 hours to dig them out. The New York Post reported:

Scores of cops, firefighters and EMTs cheered as they helped ease McLoughlin's stretcher out of the hole. *(New York Post)*

I am reminded of those words from that great hymn of the faith:

I once was lost, but now am found! *(Amazing Grace)*

Luke 15 relates three stories about lost things and about the joy that happens as a result: A lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost boy. Our Gospel for today talks about the first two: the sheep and the coin.

The context of these stories is an accusation made by the Pharisees against Jesus. Look at verses 1 and 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." (Luke 15:1-2)

The truth is: Jesus was guilty as charged. He did hang out with tax collectors and sinners. In fact, He was doing that at the very moment the accusation was lodged. He not only ate with them, He welcomed them into His innermost circle. Matthew was a tax collector. Judas was a thief.

- The gist of their accusation was this:

Why would someone who claims to be the Holy God hang out with unholy people?

It's not a new question. The Psalmist wondered the same thing:

Why do you bother with us? Why take a second look our way? (Psalm 8:4)

So Jesus tells three stories to answer their question. We will talk about the first two. And to help us see the point Jesus is making, I would like for you to think about these stories as a theater production. The teaching is presented in three scenes.

## **SCENE #1: SOMETHING GETS LOST**

Verses 4 and 8:

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them... "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. (Luke 15:4, 8)

The Pharisees understood that the tax collectors and sinners were lost. They just had difficulty in seeing themselves as "lost" too. And they definitely didn't see God as wanting to be around anyone who wasn't as good as they were. Maybe you know people like that. Maybe that was you at one point in time.

The Scriptures teach us that we are born that way. We don't have to "get lost" because we "are lost." From the moment we are born, we are lost. Romans states that clearly:

There is no one righteous, not even one. (Romans 3:10)

So those Pharisees were every bit as lost as the sinners they looked down on. They just didn't understand that.

In addition, these stories of Jesus teach us that people continue in their lostness by their own actions. His parables give great examples of how our natural tendency is to continue in our lost condition.

- Sheep, for example, stay lost because wander from the rest of the flock. They nibble their way into lostness. Without raising their heads, they go from one tuft of grass to another. By the time they look up, they are lost.
- The coin was lost through carelessness. That happens when we make bad choices, hang out in wrong situations.
- The prodigal son – not in this week's text – chose to be lost.

I recall an instance when my daughter was very young. We were shopping at the Upper Valley Mall when she wandered off. Not intentionally. She was simply exploring, moving underneath the clothing racks along an imaginary path, going from one rack to another. Just playing.

Meanwhile, Karen moved on, and since I was the one responsible for watching her, I continued to do so from a distance – where I could see her, but she couldn't see me. Finally, she reappeared and suddenly realized we were not there. She was lost. Interestingly, she had been lost for quite a while but didn't know it.

Every human being who has ever lived – even the holier-than-thou types like the Pharisees -- are lost. Some of us are lost and know it. Others are lost and haven't realized that yet.

## **SCENE #2: THE SEARCH BEGINS**

Look again at verses 4 and 8:

Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep? ... Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully? (Luke 15:4, 8)

Here's where you notice the value of that thing that was lost. How hard do they search for it? You always search for things that have value. This coin mattered. This sheep mattered.

The boss of a big company needed to call one of his employees about an urgent problem with one of the main computers. He dialed the employee's home telephone number and was greeted with a child's whispered, "Hello?"

"Is your Daddy home?" "Yes," whispered the small voice.

"May I talk with him?" the boss asked. To his surprise, the child whispered, "No."

"Well, is your Mommy there?" "Yes," came the answer.

"May I talk with her?" Again, the small voice whispered, "No."

"Is there anyone there besides you?" the boss asked the child. "Yes," whispered the child, "a policeman."

"May I speak with the policeman?" "No, he is busy talking to Daddy and Mommy and the Fireman," came the whispered answer.

"Why are they there?" Still whispering, the young voice replied (along with a muffled giggle), "They are looking for me!"

When a child is lost we call on all the resources available and search far and wide. We even have a nationwide Amber alert system that recruits everyone one of us in that search. Why? Because that child is important! He/she matters greatly to someone.

- We also have silver alerts that let us know Grandpa is missing and likely lost. Even Grandpa matters.

Those people that the Pharisees deemed unimportant matter to the God who created them. Even the Pharisees mattered to the God who created them. Here's the really good news ...

You and I matter to the God who created us.

Jesus expressed it as His personal mission statement:

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. (Luke 19:10)

All the resources of heaven were poured into that search for you. For me. For every person who has ever lived. Even those who refuse to acknowledge that they are lost.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

### **SCENE #3: THE JOY ERUPTS**

Verses 7 and 10 describe the scene:

I tell you that 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 the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Luke 15:7, 10)

Those Pharisees had never dreamed about a God like that. One great Jewish scholar has admitted that this truth is the one absolutely new thing that Jesus taught men about God – that God actually searches for them and rejoices when they are found.

- The Pharisees might have agreed that if sinners and tax collectors came crawling to God totally humiliated and repentant, God might have pity on them.
- But a God who searches for people like that? No.
- A God who expresses joy when sinners have been brought back safely to Him? Absolutely not.
- That wasn't the God they knew.

But that is our God. He eats with sinners. Revelation 3:20 says it like this:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. (Revelation 3:20)

Those words are for us. This God finds joy in hanging out with people just like us. Because people like us matter to Him.

## **APPLICATION**

At the very core of our message here at Grace is this simple truth:

God desires to have a relationship with you.

We do lots of great things here at Grace. Our ministry calendars are full. Our reputation in the community is strong. But at the heart of all is making sure that people – all people – even sinners and tax collectors – have a vibrant, growing relationship with the God who searches them and experiences great joy when they are restored to Him.

Everything we do is devoted to that goal.

- I have been a part of this congregation for 18 years. I have been on staff in one capacity or another for 11 years. During that time we have added and ended ministries, events, and activities around this simple theme. How does it help people go from being lost to being found.
- The moment we stop caring about the sinners and tax collectors is the moment we become useless for the Kingdom of God.
- Each one of us is called to this mission, and we each contribute to it in different ways ... through our Time, Talent, Testimony and Treasure.

Do you want to be a part of something that produces joy? Don't miss this point. Real joy comes from the work of the Kingdom! Look at verses 7 and 10:

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We encourage your participation in this mission.

Amen.