

SERMON
“A Spirit Blows Through Us”
Rally Day
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I Timothy 1: 12-17

Even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence I received mercy and the grace of our Lord overflowed from me. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that **Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.**

Luke 15: 1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with 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? 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.’ 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.

“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? 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. Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God, over one sinner who repents.

SERMON

The whole of chapter 15 of Luke's gospel, you could say, is about the lost and found department. Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a sermon about this chapter in Luke that she titled just that, "The Lost and Found Department." The first two parables of the chapter about a lost sheep and the lost coin (that make up our text for today), followed by the Prodigal Son story, are all "good news", one might say; all good news, all of the time. Everything and everyone that was lost...gets found. The lost sheep is draped over the shepherd's shoulders and returned to the flock. The woman sweeps and searches until the coin is found. And that run away boy finds his way home, and oh the parties and celebrating that follows. God knows I love to hear these stories. I like knowing that when I am lost, the good shepherd will come in search of me. And no matter how lost I may be, Christ will not give up on me until I am found.

Yes sirree, this is mighty good news as long as we are the ones lost and in need of being found. It is great news until we realize the parable is also about the **slime buckets** no one wants to see saved. From the present looking back into the past, it is hard to really understand why the Pharisees have such a bur in their saddle. What's all the fuss about? Jesus, the good shepherd, is just out doing his job. **My liberal bleeding heart** goes out to all the poor unfortunate souls he touches. Zacchaeus, the tax collector, up that sycamore tree; the father's coattail flapping in the breeze as he runs to welcome his lost boy home. These stories put a catch in our throats, but oh how we need to get past the fluff we've laid over Jesus' teachings.

For 8 years, I lived across the street from some of the most lost people I would ever meet. Granted, I was a child yet they were my formative years. They lived two doors down across the street. The house in which they lived must have once been a beautiful old plantation home. It was huge and decomposing from lack of care. In a neighborhood where everyone kept perfect

lawns, we just wished they'd move on. I don't remember anyone praying for Jesus to find these lost souls. We were too busy praying for Jesus to save us from them.

The mother was a prostitute, or at least, so my mother said. "If she wasn't a prostitute she certainly had a slew of gentlemen callers," again my mother's words. Her kids were as mean as hell. We did not have to be told not to hang out with the likes of them. We did everything we could to keep our distance. They loved to sic their dog on our dogs. My beloved Freckles came home more than once bloodied from head to tail. Eventually, their dog killed my Freckles. I had been attached at the hip to this dog. My childhood heart was crushed.

And more than our dogs were in danger. They loved to pick fights at the bus stop. More than once my cousins came home with bloodied noses. I don't remember their names. Don't know that I ever knew them. They were the nameless children with whom we never associated. No one would have ever thought to invite them to the ice cream socials we had on our front lawns in the summer--or any other neighborhood event. Certainly no one would have considered inviting them into their homes to share a meal. You'd have to be out of your mind to do so.

Well, that's what the Pharisees and scribes thought about Jesus. He was not just inviting them over to his house to dine. He was going over to their big, run-down, and scary plantation houses that they knew with all their being you needed to keep as much distance from as possible.

We so easily label the Pharisees the bad guys until we realize...we are they. They were the devoted religious people of the day. We regular church goers are their modern day equals. They did not merely talk about the life of faith. They lived it. They give God's law their full respect and conscientious obedience. No easy task, if any of you have given it a try.

It's not like they were unconcerned about sinners. They were. They just believed that the best way to help sinners was to model a higher standard, all the while challenging them to

become the best they could be, and of course letting them know when they had fallen short so that the sinner would know it was time to go buy an animal sacrifice at the Synagogue Store to make their selves clean again.

While they were still unclean dirty scoundrels, anyone in their right minds knew to keep their distance. If you start socializing with sinners, their sins just might rub off on you. You could be corrupted. It would be almost like selling your soul to the devil. Plus, if one hangs out with the criminal element of society, you could end up hurt, even killed. Best to keep your distance! This Jesus clearly had to be out of his mind.

Top all of this off with the fact that the parables show preference to the lost over the found. The good shepherd would desert the 99 sheep that have not wandered off the beaten path in search of the one that has. There is no joy like God's joy over the lost being found. What about the 99 sheep, the 9 coins, and the son that was there all along? Are these teachings of Jesus just telling us to get lost? One might get the idea that to get God's attention you are better off being lost than found. That is until you are lost. I mean really lost. Then you know there is nothing worst, and you cling to the promise of God's diligent searching.

Yet, it's easy to see how "the good news, all of the time" isn't always easy to swallow. And we still have one more deep dark river to cross before we've fully embraced Jesus' teaching in these parables. We are not just called to identify with the Pharisees in our attempts to see ourselves as the faithful, the righteous. We are not just called to identify with the lost sheep and coin. We are called to join Jesus' search party.

"Which one of you," says Jesus, "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 is found?" (Luke 15:4) "Which one of you..." He is not inviting the Pharisees to see themselves as sheep,

but as the shepherd? Herein things begin to get really tricky. It would seem that Jesus is suggesting: no, no, that's way to tame a word. Jesus is saying, if we want to be a follower of his we are to go search for the slime buckets, the prostitute birthed dog killers—the deeply lost—until they are found.

When we look at the “lost and found” parables from this perspective, the story begins to sound different: the story is no longer about me slapping my hand over being too self-righteous. Nor is it about how, being found, or hearing stories about how others were found, warm the cockles of my heart. It's about inviting some downright scary people into your life.

I have had years of training as a pastoral counselor and this is where I saw myself headed when I entered seminary. I felt a strong call to be a minister, but I felt certain it could not be a calling to parish ministry. I was a terrible writer and could not imagine myself a public speaker. So I thought, it must be that I am to do ministry as a pastoral counselor. So for the first two years of seminary I took as many pastoral counseling courses as I could. The rule of thumb across helping professions? Do not get too close to your patient, and if you become friends with a patient, you must sever the patient client relationship. Every minister must take courses in what's called “boundry training.”

Yet, there it is in black and white—right there in our Bible. Jesus saying, “which one of you would not go searching for the lost?” Invite those kids over to the ice cream socials and open your dining rooms to them. Which, by the way, according to Jewish custom, when you broke bread with someone...they became family.

This troubles me, for I have seen loss in the sad eyes of some who sat across the table from me. Many were too lost for me to find. I've heard the sad stories of parents who have had

to turn lost children out of their homes. Yet, it would seem that Jesus is saying, "...search until you find them".

No one teaches us "finding skills". With a sheep, no problem! Never done it, but it sounds easy enough. You grab them by the scruff of their neck, haul them through the air to lay across your shoulders, and go home. With people, it is a bit more complicated. The most skilled psychiatrist, psychologist, therapist, counselor will tell you that, "there are some people beyond being found. For your own health you need to distance yourself from these people".

With this knowledge my liberal bleeding heart breaks into a thousand pieces. My mother use to tell me I scared her because I was the type to bring home birds with broken wings and stray cats that inflicted pain in my rescue attempts. She figured I was just one step away from bringing home broken people. As one who has gone in search of the lost, the down and out, I can tell you there is so much sadness in this line of ministry. Sometimes it makes me angry that Jesus encourages us to do it.

Then I wonder about those nameless kids across the street. What would have happened if we had invited them to just one ice cream party on our front lawn? Maybe they were young enough to still be found. I don't know what happen to them. We moved away when I was 9. None of my aunts and uncles who remained, know what became of them. It's as if they just faded away, as they did from our memory.

So I wonder...what if? Would they have turned out differently or would they have robbed us blind and broke our hearts. Well I'm here to tell you, it is worth the risk, for when you find one lost soul the spirit flows through you lighting candles of extreme joy. The saying is worthy of repeating, "There is great joy in the presence of angels of God, over one sinner who repents." Plus, turns out the criminal element didn't kill Jesus. The righteous did!

But what if they tromp across our hearts until we find ourselves lost souls? Then someone will call our name, and a big brown hand will grab us by the scruff of the neck, haul us through the air and lay us across broad shoulder to carry us home. Amen.