



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Knowing Loss” **Sermon on Luke 15:1-10**

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Luke 15:1-10

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³So he told them this parable: ⁴"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? ⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.'

⁷Just 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.

⁸"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? ⁹And 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.'

¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

"Ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine! Hold on! "One, two, three..." As you know, it is not easy counting sheep. They don't stand still, and they all look alike.

“Ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight...” When it’s supposed to be 100 and three recounts later, you have only 99. You know what you’ve lost, and the search begins!

The same is true for the coins. “Seven, eight, nine...” “Seven, eight, nine...” When there’s supposed to be ten, you know what you’ve lost, and the search begins. The sheep, the coin, the cat, the dog, the umbrella, the keys, the eyeglasses, all could have gone missing for hours, days, years! But the search doesn’t begin until it dawns on you, “I know what I’ve lost.”

John Penton, our Sexton at the church for the last 16 years, and a friend as long as you have known him, had a heart attack early on Wednesday morning. When I got back to the church from the hospital, every face in the office knew what it had lost. There began the search for words. There are no words. “He was so faithful. He was so kind. I’m going to miss his laugh. He was easy and made our lives easy.” Searching for words to try to fill the hole that was the size and shape of John Penton.

When you know what you’ve lost, the action begins. The shepherd in the parable is doing the acting. Deep wood and dark valley. Looking! Listening!

I could be wrong, but I don’t think the sheep knew it was lost. Sheep have never struck me as having a vibrant internal world of thoughts, ideas, and reflections. Have you ever had a conversation with a sheep? They just look at you. Not so different than many of you are looking at me right now. I don’t think the sheep knew. He was just off looking for greener pastures.

I’m pretty sure the coin didn’t know it was lost.

It was only the shepherd, and only the woman who knew what was lost.

Now that we have that understood, why on earth would Jesus talk about a lost sheep and a lost coin in terms of repentance? What did Jesus say, “There’s more joy in the kingdom over the one sinner who repents, than over the 99 who need no repentance.”

Wait! Where and when did we hear repentance in these parables?

Did we hear the shepherd say, “Listen, sheep, you baaaaad, baaaaad sheep. I want you to sit down right now and think about your sins, sheep. I want you to think about me counting sheep 98, 98, 98.... And was there a 99? NO! The worry! No telling what’s going on back at the ranch! Look, what do you have to say for yourself?

“Coin! Coin! You’d better repent, coin! Turn your life around, coin! Rolling off doing your own thing! You need to change, change!”

Crazy to think a sheep or a coin can repent! So, in a parable about repentance, where’s repentance?

Jesus is sitting with sinners and tax collectors. And the Pharisees are grumbling. And Jesus seems to be advocating with his body language and with his words that the work of God is knowing the loss, seeking the lost.

I think Jesus was a little frustrated with the religious establishment. Their job was to keep the community as a community with each other and with God. But someone began to assign the word "purity" to God. If God is pure, to be in relationship with God, you and I must be pure.... Or, at least, look pure. The great sin of the religious establishment was to establish a hierarchy. The pure and the impure. The sin is I'm thinking more of myself than of you.

When purity becomes the theme, then you dispose of the impure because you can't have "impure" mixing it up with the pure. Keep the pure. Pure. Once you start looking at it that way, you can slowly and then quickly begin to get rid of the impure.

I suppose a shepherd could whittle down a flock by tossing sheep out one by one and keeping it pure and white, pure white. Get it down to ten sheep, two sheep, no sheep... just a shepherd. When is a shepherd not a shepherd? When he has no sheep. Purely a fraud in shepherd's clothing.

Every day, we have to challenge ourselves to know the loss. We can't just whittle people away.

I was thinking back to when Beth and I lived in Princeton, NJ, and how when friends or family came to visit, we'd drive to Staten Island and get on the ferry. Go by the Statue of Liberty. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

I recall how we would come ashore, walk a few blocks and buy some tickets to ride the elevator up 110 stories. Top of the world, those twin towers. I was thinking about the planes and the firemen, and I remember picking my children up from school. They were so small. I was thinking you can make a new tower, taller than ever. You can. But do you know what's missing?

Innocence. People.

I was thinking about how it was at the airport before that time. I could sit at the gate. I used to enjoy seeing the embraces there at the gate. A great show of the human condition. People embracing! The lover's kiss, "Goodbye!" The lover's kiss, "Hello!" Some of you are old enough to remember that. It was wonderful. Now the best thing at the gate is the restroom. Do you know what we've lost?

I was thinking this week about a day when a shooting came as a shock. Now it's every day. Why, you don't even hear about the Minneapolis shooting anymore. We've moved on to the newest tragedy. Saw it live, Charlie Kirk. And as it is with the shootings of those in politics, some know the loss, and some celebrate the loss. Do you know what we've lost? We've lost our minds, people.

I was thinking this week about how we have lost Jesus. There are so many people holding on to a Jesus that is not even recognizable to other people who are holding on to Jesus. "That's not Jesus." "Well, that's not Jesus!" "That's not Jesus!"

I'm reminded of a politician who once said, "Both sides read the same Bible and pray to the same Jesus, and each side invokes His aid against the other." He said that during the Civil War once. It's a lot of work keeping Jesus pure.

I wonder if we could agree that in the Bible, there was a time when Jesus was talking to sinners, tax collectors, and Pharisees, too. I was thinking that all sides came near to listen to him. Luke doesn't immediately tell us what Jesus was saying, but for some reason, people were coming to listen to him. Why? Maybe we knew what he was saying. Because surely, if we sat here for a moment, we'd know what we are missing.

Maybe everyone was finding something they were missing.

Maybe he was saying, "You're following the wrong thing. I heard the Governor of Utah say, "Social media is a cancer on society right now. I would encourage people to log off, turn off, touch grass, hug a family member, go out and do good in your community."

Do you think he's right? Not the governor, Jesus. "Follow me and only me." Do you think he's right? "Follow me. Take up my cross. Come to me, all you who labor and I will give your rest." And in that rest, I might discover that I have a spouse, a dog, and a heartbeat.

People were drawn to him. I think they found something they were missing - someone to say, "Stop it!" Stop your secret sin. You're hurting yourself, and you're hurting your family, and you don't know the loss. Stop it!"

Maybe Jesus was saying, "You are made in the image of God. You are made in my image. I love you. Do you see how beautiful you are?"

Jesus could draw us all in. And I think we'd know exactly what we had lost in the Word that we found.

Luke just writes, "Sinners and tax collectors and pharisees came near to listen to him." We don't know what he was saying, but we know what he was saying. Because after a while, he told some parables about people who knew what they had lost and would not rest until they restored what they had lost.

On this day that the Lord has made, we know the loss—the terrible tragedies of this world. There are no words! We must go and find the Word.

Go find the Word. You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, all your mind. Get rid of all that other stuff. And then you are to love your neighbor. Who is my neighbor? The one who is made in the image of God, and it is everybody!

Go find your neighbors; they come in all shapes and sizes, all political persuasions, all colors. And when you find your neighbor, there you'll find your Savior!

Rejoice with me! For I was lost, and now I am found.

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