

1 {Read Luke 15:8-10 (The Message)}

2 Is there anybody here who's never lost anything? Losing a coin isn't usually as much of a concern these days as it was in the days of Jesus, but there are other objects that can really get our minds and hearts racing as we frantically search for them, while our oh-so-helpful friends call out to us, "Where was the last place you remember having it?" If I could remember that, I probably wouldn't have lost it!

I don't usually lose my keys, but my wallet is a regular object of anxiety. I have a brown leather wallet that tends to fall into the cracks of my brown leather recliner, instantly becoming invisible. I have a black cell phone and a black interior in my truck that perfectly camouflages the cell phone. And sometimes I simply set something down in a very peculiar place. Michelle Jones and I have a regular laugh when after an hour I circle back to her office in the church to pick up my coffee mug that I had set down as we were talking—sometimes on her desk, sometimes on a bookshelf, once even on a chair. And just this week, as I was preparing this message about lost things, UPS lost a package that I was waiting for.

I want you to think of something that you've lost and then found, something that seemed really important at the time, and the relief you felt when you found it. Do you have something in mind? If sharing a story isn't something you're comfortable with, you can just sit and reflect on that experience. Otherwise, I invite you to turn to someone else and briefly share your stories with each other. {Wait for about a minute as people share}

You probably don't throw a party when you find your lost car keys, but I'll bet you've shared the story with someone, including the wave of relief you felt when you found them. If the woman who found the lost coin seems to have had an overblown reaction to finding her lost coin, it's partly because the coin represented something of greater value than most coins do today. But even more importantly, this isn't really a story about coins at all, is it? This is a story about each lost soul that turned away from God, but then was found again. And you better believe that each lost person, each lost child of God, is of infinite worth and concern to the one who calls us beloved.

3 The Apostle Luke offers us three parables about lost things that are found. Today we'll look at the lost coin and the lost sheep, and then next week we'll finish up our summer

parable series with Luke's third story, the story about two lost sons. All three stories are offered by Jesus as a response to the Pharisees and religious scholars who were complaining that Jesus was fraternizing with sinners. As we read these parables, we need to constantly going back to that encounter and ask: In what ways were the Pharisees and religious scholars getting it wrong that prompted Jesus to tell these stories?

We'll spend most of our time today with the story of the lost sheep. It's really almost identical to the story of the lost coin, with these basic elements in common: Something is lost; someone goes searching; something is found; and there is a celebration. Remember, we're not really talking about coins and livestock, but about people, especially the people the Pharisees and religious scholars were turning up their noses at- people who obviously, visibly didn't fit into the expectations of the day for righteous living in the community of God's people.

4 Before we dive further into the parable of the lost sheep, I have a modern retelling of the parable for you, this time in an animated cartoon. As you watch the video, pay attention to the attitude of the sheep. Why did he leave the flock? When did he first realize he was in trouble? How did he become aware of the trouble? And what happened in the end to his "urge to roam." Let's take a look...{[Show Parable of the Lost Sheep \(2:30\)](#)}

5 The parable doesn't specify what kind of trouble, if any, the sheep was in, besides being lost. We don't know if it was a young lamb who didn't know any better, a sheep that got caught on the side of a cliff, or an older sheep who couldn't keep up. I like the video retelling, where the sheep acts like a rebellious teenager who wants to strike out on his own. It was the "urge to roam" that led to his predicament, and the mistaken believe that the way to find greener grass was to leave the good pasture he already had.

Honestly reflect for a moment on a time when you got into trouble because of something stupid you said or did, didn't say or didn't do. This is just between you and God; I won't ask you to share it. Did your trouble start the way it did for the lost sheep in the video? Did you wander away from Jesus, following an urge to roam, believing it really didn't matter if you just crossed over a hill or two? Maybe it was a behavior or attitude that you rationalized as being acceptable, but you knew falls short of God's image of holy love. Maybe you told yourself that it couldn't hurt to try something once, as long as it didn't

become a habit. Maybe you told yourself that it was ok as long as you didn't get caught. The urge to roam might look different for each of us, but it's a condition we all suffer with from time to time.

Like so many of us, the sheep never even realized he was in mortal danger until after the shepherd came and picked him up. It was only on the shepherd's shoulders, when he could see the world from the perspective of the shepherd, that he could also see the danger of the wolf. That's exactly why worship, prayer, Bible study, and fellowship with other Christians is so crucial to us. They keep us close to Jesus and they give us God's perspective of the world. We need to see our lives through the eyes of Jesus if we want to avoid getting lost.

6 We'll talk next week about coping with our own lostness, but for now let's focus on the Good Shepherd, the one we're supposed to be following and modelling our lives after. It's a little surprising to me that the shepherd even noticed that one of the hundred was missing. I could see noticing that one out of ten coins was missing, but one sheep out of one hundred? Those of you who raise livestock might say that you know each of your animals by name, including their individual idiosyncrasies. But let's talk about missing people. I'm guessing all of us have friends, family members, neighbors, and co-workers who go missing from time to time, fading out of contact for one reason or another. We certainly have people in our church family who go missing. I have to say that as hard as we try to develop administrative systems to track all of the sheep in this flock, some sheep always slip through the fence and wander away unnoticed.

While I believe our contact cards and databases and emails are all useful and necessary, I think Jesus shows us the primary means of saving the lost sheep: Attentive shepherds who are always on the lookout for lost sheep. Pastors have long been seen as the shepherd of congregations, and in some ways I do try to be that. But as we've learned through our MCCI experience, in today's world we need not one, but a whole congregation of shepherds, just as the kids acted out for us earlier. I'm guessing that for each person in our congregation who has turned up missing, there's at least one other person who's noticed their absence. Noticing the lost sheep, whether it's at church or in your neighborhood, is the necessary first step, without which a rescue mission will never be mounted.

7 Mounting a rescue mission doesn't always require that you put your life in danger. The first step in the rescue is always prayer- not a prayer to change someone else, but for the humility and sensitivity to learn about the lost person's life. The longer I'm in ministry the more I'm convinced that what lost and hurting people need first is simply a chance to talk and be heard. We all have a need to be acknowledged as people, and to share our fears and joys, pain and celebrations. Sometimes people really are hanging on for their very life on the edge of a cliff, entangled in an addiction, a toxic relationship, or simply old-fashioned selfishness and pride. Those rescues sometimes require dramatic intervention, but they begin with prayer and listening.

All rescues require that lost sheep discover, or rediscover, that the way home is a person, Jesus, the Good Shepherd. How does that happen? We know that the Holy Spirit always goes before any rescue mission we might undertake. After that, forming an authentic, loving relationship with someone who bears the light of Christ is the most common means of rescue. Very often it doesn't happen through contact with just one shepherd but through the graceful witness of a whole flock of shepherds. The rescue technique is less important than the state of the heart of the rescuers- the state of our hearts. Hasn't God shown to you at least one lost person? When God calls your attention to a hurting person, that's an invitation to join in God's work of healing.

8 So here's the thing. Jesus didn't travel around the countryside telling parables to entertain the crowds. Jesus was on a mission. Jesus is still on a mission, the very same mission that we're called to join him on. Jesus said, "the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost"¹ He came in fulfillment of God's promise through the prophet Ezekiel, who wrote, "I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace... I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak."² That's the mission of Jesus. The question is this: If we're serious about growing into the likeness of our savior, what are we willing to do today to join him on that mission of finding the lost sheep?

¹ Luke 19:10. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

² Ezekiel 34:15-16a. Ibid.



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