

The Ones About the Lost Being Found

A winning touchdown scored in the second overtime!

A diploma earned.

A new job offered.

A baby born.

A couple wed.

The news of cancer defeated.

A 95th birthday.

Occasions for celebration.

When has joy broken out in your life?

Can you remember that feeling of joy? That feeling of excitement – the feeling of deep peace – that feeling that all is right with the world.

And Jesus said, “I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life.” Joy breaks out in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life.

But this story of great celebration in heaven all starts with Jesus, some tax collectors and an assortment of sinners. They were gathered around Jesus, and they were listening.

Now, tax collectors are around for a lot of Jesus’s story, and they always seem to get a bad name in the bible. The tax collectors were under the command of the oppressive Roman government, and they were known for overcharging the citizens on their taxes to line their own pockets. And then, imagine sinners of all kinds – those who have failed to obey Jewish ritual law and those who are guilty of all kinds of moral failings – you can use your imagination about the kinds of sinners that might have been there. Tax collectors and sinners came to listen to Jesus. They knew they were in the wrong, and they were drawn to Jesus because they had some kind of sense that he could make things right for them. And they were listening.

But there was another group of people around Jesus that day, and they were not listening to Jesus. Instead they were grumbling and complaining and judging. They were the Pharisees and the legal experts. And they were upset because not only did Jesus spend time with tax collectors and sinners, but he ate with them! He shared a table with them; he accepted them; he became their friend; he even wanted to develop relationships with them! And this was simply unheard of under the Jewish law – in their minds Jesus should not have even given them the time of day much less shared a meal with them.

These are the two groups of people to whom Jesus spoke the words we heard earlier -- the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. So the message must have been meant for those “lost” sinners **and** for those who were righteous under the law - those who followed the Jewish law and lived upright and respectable lives. So what we can learn from Jesus’s stories of the lost that are found?

Both parables have the same pattern.

1. Something is lost.

2. What is lost is sought out.

3. The lost is found.

4. And a great celebration results.

So, first, something is lost. One sheep out of a flock of 99. One coin out of ten. Or maybe, one person out of a billion.

Then, what is lost is sought out.

Even if the shepherd has to leave the whole flock, he seeks out the one lost sheep. And Jesus asks, “Who among you wouldn’t leave the 99?” Who among you wouldn’t leave the 99?

Think about that question? Is Jesus being sarcastic? Because who really does that? That doesn’t make a lot of business sense to us! We wouldn’t risk a 99% loss to gain 1%! But being a part of the kingdom of God is a radical and surprising way of loving. The shepherd is dedicated to **each** member of his flock. What faithfulness the shepherd has....what concern for each one.

And imagine the woman lighting the lamp and holding it high.....sweeping, sweeping, sweeping the dirt floor of her house.... looking for the one lost coin until she finds it. What patience and determination.

And that is how God seeks out that one lost soul – with faithfulness, concern, patience, determination – he seeks us with amazing love and attention to each. Each one of us is valuable to God. Saint Augustine said it this way: **“God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.”**

And when the lost is found, a celebration breaks out. When the shepherd finds that one sheep, he is thrilled and places the sheep on his shoulders. ⁶When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost sheep.’

And when the woman finds the lost coin, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Celebrate with me because I’ve found my lost coin.’

And when one of us changes our heart and life, all God’s angels rejoice – joy breaks out over us! Did you ever think about God having joy in you? God finds joy in us! Not from our accomplishments --- but when we change – when our hearts and lives turn toward God. When we become filled with God instead of ourselves, God is joyful. And God will never give up on finding any one of us. **“God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.”**

This is God’s amazing grace. It is God’s love that is seeking us out before we even know that God exists. It is God seeking out his lost sheep. It is God seeking out his precious coin. It is God seeking a relationship with us when we don’t even know that we are lost. That one lost sheep means everything to God.....that one lost coin....that one lost person.

I think God continues to search for you throughout your lives. I think this story is relevant and real to us today. And so, I have a challenge for you this week to test this idea. I ask if you would try a couple of things and let me know what happens. Open your Bible and spend a few minutes every day reading it. Just open it up – just any place will do. Then spend some time in silence. Listening and talking to God. Or spend some time serving others. And see what happens. Make some time this week to notice God and to listen to what God might want to say to you. Just take the time to notice how God is searching for you. That can be the first step to a huge celebration breaking out in heaven.

But let’s think about this story some more. Don’t forget that Jesus is talking to two groups of people – the sinners, who realized they were lost. They realized their lives were a mess and they wanted what Jesus had. They wanted to be healed, they wanted to experience the

power of Jesus- the power of God! And so, they sat with Jesus, and they listened. They ate meals with Jesus, and they developed a relationship with him. I am guessing that they changed their hearts. And not only that, I have to believe if they stuck with Jesus long enough they changed their lives, too.

But the Pharisees and legal experts were hearing these parables, too. Jesus also directed the parables to these people who were trying to obey God's law and trying to live the right way, but who were grumbling instead of learning from Jesus. And so to me, the real twist to this story is the thought that we can be righteous and lost, too. Most of us try hard to live good, Christian lives and to do the right thing. But some of us may still be lost. I was. And sometimes, I still am!

I went to church most every Sunday for about 30 years, but I was lost. I never knew I was lost. I never knew I didn't have God in my life. After all, I came to God's house all the time – I was doing all the right things..... on the outside any way. Like the Pharisees, I was following all the rules. But I had not given my heart and my life to God. I just went to church...I was a great pew sitter.

But my heart began to stir when I began studying God's word. And even though it took years, God didn't give up on me. One baby step at a time, my heart and my life changed. I was lost, and God came searching. In fact, I realized looking back at my life that God had been looking for me to change for a long time. And when I finally woke up, when I finally figured out that I belonged to God, and that God had a purpose for me, it changed my life! I was found and I didn't even know I was lost.

I heard a funny story about Daniel Boone that rang true to this parable for me. You remember Daniel Boone; he explored the wilderness of Tennessee and Kentucky. It was Daniel Boone who marked the wilderness road that brought settlers into the new land. He often wandered over huge areas of forest, living off the land and dodging arrows. Once he was asked if he had ever been lost. He replied, "No," he had never been lost, but he did admit that he was "a mite confused once for about three or four days though!"

Well, perhaps it didn't matter much that Daniel Boone's pride would not allow him to admit that he'd never been lost and that he was in need of guidance. But it matters a lot, if our pride or even our ignorance keeps us from admitting that we are lost without Christ. Sometimes it even seems like some of us refuse to be found. Even so, God is still looking. **"God loves each of us as if there were only one of us."** God's grace is still there for the taking.

We can feel lost in so many ways. I feel lost today because there have been two mass shootings in our country in 24 hours. We can be lost in grief, addiction, pain and depression.

But the good news for us is that when something is lost, God seeks. And great celebration breaks out when we are found. Joy breaks out when one person changes her heart and her life.

But let me step you up one more level of thinking. Not only does God seek the lost and celebrate when they are found, God must expect his followers to react in the same way. Not only is this a story about the grumblers who didn't recognize their own sin -- who couldn't see that they, too, were lost. It's also a story about how these religious leaders labeled other people "sinners." They were without mercy for those sinners who craved the presence of Jesus. Surely Jesus wants us to love each one and celebrate when each one of the lost is found. Surely Jesus would be horrified if we got too wrapped up in our churchiness and failed to show God's love

and acceptance to the one who is struggling. Surely Jesus wants us to step up and invite every one to the table to begin building a life-changing relationship with Christ.

Today's scripture is about celebration. Joy breaks out in heaven when one person changes her heart and her life. If the parables teach us something about the character of God, know that God's love never gives up, know that God's love is for sinners and saints alike, know that God feels joy when the lost are found! Know that "God loves each of us as if there were only one of us." And know that Jesus calls us to go and do likewise---to be the love of God -- to show love to the lost; to show love to the one who feels bitter, angry, hopeless and far from the love of God. May we bring the light of Christ to one. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.