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The Lost – Luke 15

This past week I had a chance to go work on a farm in rural northern Indiana. I received a grant this year to spend one day a month at a farm in North Manchester, Indiana. In the morning, myself and 5 other pastors work on the farm feeding livestock, planting crops and various other farm-related tasks. Then we eat a lunch prepared from ingredients off of the farm. In the afternoon we sit around a table and discuss theology. It has been great.

I went this past week on Thursday and one of the first jobs I had in the morning was **pulling fresh eggs from the hen coop.** The whole day it was rainy and cold. And as we were feeding the chickens, there was this one chicken sitting outside the coop sop and wet and covered with scratches and just looking awful.

All chicken flocks have a well-defined pecking order. It's their way of preventing mayhem. The lucky chicken at the top of the pecking order basically gets to push everyone around. She gets first access to food, water, prime roosting spots and so on. If she doesn't like what anyone else is doing she has full pecking rights. She gets to tell any other chicken to bug off. The poor chicken at the bottom of the pecking order is in the exact opposite situation: everyone in the flock can peck her, and she has last rights to food and other resources. The other chickens in a flock fall somewhere between these two extremes. The #2 chicken can only be bullied by the #1 chicken and can bully everyone else in turn, and so on and so on. This pecking order is established at a very early age and usually remains unchallenged until death.

The hen sitting outside was the lowest in the pecking order. She was freezing and sop and wet while the other chickens were enjoying the shelter. I don't know, but I bet the chickens inside the coop were so busy enjoying each others company, the warmth of the shelter and the egg laying fun that they probably often forgot about the hen sitting on the outside. There was definitely no chickens going out to check on her. She was out of sight and out of mind.

As I observed this sight I couldn't help but wonder whether churches are sometimes like this. We have a pecking order to the ways that we do things. We get comfortable in our nice warm seats for that expectable hour and fifteen minutes. We smile and say hello to the same people each week. We hurry to schedule new meetings and stuff to do. And sometimes we get so caught up on the inside that we forget

that our task is really on the outside. In fact we might even get uneasy if someone is spending too much time on the outside as if they aren't loyal to the "church."

In our passage this morning, Jesus tells three stories. All of the stories go together, but they come from a conversation that Jesus is having with the Pharisees.

Read Luke 15.

The Pharisees are Jews and so they live by all of the Old Testament laws. But they are a specific sect of Judaism. There were different denominations of Jews that held slightly different interpretations of the Old Testament laws. The Pharisees adhered to a particular body of traditions which were both an interpretation of Old Testament law and a supplement to it. **Generally the Pharisees that Jesus interacts with are legalists.** They are obsessed with the letter of the law and with uncleanness. They believed they would be made unclean by even being around particular people that did not follow their rules.

In the passage Jesus has a crowd of tax collectors and sinners gathering around to hear him. And while the crowd is gathering the Pharisees come along and "mutter" "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

We have seen this muttering . . . "ughh, I can't believe she would wear that." "ughh, of course x, y, z happened, have you seen who he hangs out with." "ughh, that person is lazy, gross, rude, and so on."

Jesus looks straight at the "muttering" Pharisees and begins to tell them some stories.

I love how he does this. I am trying to get better at this. It is wiser than our methods. I would want to say, "you guys are idiots." But Jesus is wiser than me and he lets them convict themselves through the stories he tells. He puts them in the story and forces them to consider how they would react under certain circumstances.

Do you see this? Instead of my "idiot" strategy, Jesus simply says to the Pharisees, let's pretend that you are a shepherd and you have 100 sheep and although 99 of them stay right where you want them, one of the them wanders off and runs away.

What are you going to do? Are you going to just say, “oh shucks, that poor sheep?” No, you will leave the 99 to go find the one. And not only will you willingly leave the 99, but you will rejoice when you find the 1. And you will get your friends together and throw a party. Then Jesus makes his point, this is how God works. There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that repents compared to 99 who do not need to repent.

Then he reemphasizes his point. Suppose this time, a woman, has 10 silver coins and loses one of them. Isn't she frantic to find it. And when she finds it doesn't she too call her friends and celebrate what she has found. In the same way there is rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents.

These days Miriam goes through our drawers in the house and takes things out and then they disappear and we have to go on a frantic search to find them. This week she took out some soap that Dana wanted and we went on an all out search throughout the house to find the soap.

There are some things we don't care that much about losing though. The other day I was in the garage looking for an old rag that I often use to clean something up, but I couldn't find it and it was no big deal because I can just tear up an old t-shirt or something else and get a new rag. I did not feel compelled to find the missing rag.

If I told you that there was \$1000 hidden in this room somewhere though. You would start looking for it. Many of you would skip lunch and stay all afternoon and into the evening looking for it.

Now if I tell you that there is a dirty rag hidden somewhere in the sanctuary, my guess is no one will even spend 10 seconds looking for it. (this changes if I describe how important the rag is to me)

The Pharisees think that the sinners and tax collectors are dirty rags, while Jesus is saying that they are valued sheep or a silver coin. And it is not just that the sinners and tax collectors are valuable, in a sense they are the most valuable because they are lost. They are the focus . . . they are the object of Jesus' most intensive efforts.

In fact it is for “the lost” that Jesus came at all. **Luke 19 makes this clear, Jesus “came to seek and save the lost.”** The Message translation fleshes this out for us, Jesus came to “restore” the lost.

What does that mean? **God created us, designed us, brought us into existence to be in relationship with us.** We exist to know and be known by him as sheep know and are known by their shepherd. And we were destined to have a perfect relationship with God, to be really who we were created to be . . . to have a harmonious fellowship and union with God, each other, and all of creation.

But from the moment that Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden we have chosen to leave that relationship that we were destined for and wander off. **Isaiah 53:6 says, “we all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.”**

People are lost in all sorts of ways. Some people are lost in the hustle and bustle of their careers. Some are lost in addictions. Others in broken families or the stress of paying bills. Some are lost in pride and self-importance. Some in the pursuit of pleasure. Some in the pursuit of wealth.

Being lost is being separated from God by choice. Going astray and turning to our own ways.

Lost sheep wander off in pursuit of something else other than the pasture of the Good Shepherd.

And Jesus came to bring us back to our relationship with God. Jesus “came to seek and save the lost . . . to restore the lost's relationship with God.

There is a recurrent pattern in the Gospels where Jesus is hanging out with some people that the religious leaders of the day thought we sketchy. And they start pointing out that Jesus must not be that great of guy if he is hanging out with “those” people. And Jesus says, “ummmm, those are the people that I came for . . . is it not the sick that need a doctor?” Luke 5:31 says, **“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”**

What is ironic is that they are all lost. The super-self-righteous religious leaders are lost too they just don't know it. They look around and imagine that they are one of God's sheep . . . and then they look at others, the sinners and tax collectors, and think they are the only ones lost. (notice that Jesus doesn't say

that the sinners and the tax collectors have it figured out – just that they deserve his attention or are the design for his attention.)

The Pharisees' gripe is that Jesus welcomes these people. They may be lazy, gross, rude, and so on . . . but Jesus still welcomes them to be with him. There is nothing about Jesus telling them that they are living stellar lives and making good choices and condoning what they are doing . . . the text simply says that Jesus welcomes them to be with him. They had as much access to God as anyone else.

As the Pharisees look on, Jesus has one more story for them. He tells them the story of a son that works with his dad on the farm and expects an inheritance. Instead of working the farm until his dad dies, the son decides to ask for his inheritance early and then goes off and lives wildly. It doesn't take long before he has squandered everything. Then a famine hits the area and the son finds himself so hungry that he desires to eat even what pigs are eating. Eventually the son decides that he will return to his father's farm and repent of what he had done. He returns and fully expects to be put amongst the hired hands, but as he is arriving at the farm, his father sees him and sprints towards him to greet him. **He throws his arms around him and throws a party.** In the text, the father says, **"Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate."**

The story that Jesus tells then ends with the son's older brother really angry that his father has welcomed his son so openly despite what he had done in squandering all of his wealth. It seems unfair. In this story Jesus tells he is putting the Pharisees in the place of the older son, who does not believe that the younger son should be honored.

In all of these stories Jesus has one clear message. The lost are his passion. The lost are his purpose. The lost are his priority.

Jesus "came to seek and save the lost."

Often as we wrestle with this clear biblical idea for Jesus' coming to earth, we think about our condition as sinners and our conversion moving from being lost to being found in Christ. And that is a powerful thing. We remember being lost and being found and value our new life in Christ.

But what I worry about, is that our faith becomes too I oriented. **We are immeasurably grateful for what God has done for us, but think rarely about what God wants to do for others.**

Riverside recently completed our 2010 Congregational Survey and on it there were a whole host of questions about various aspects of our spiritual lives. One of the questions asked how regularly we share our faith with others. This was by far the weakest category amongst us. We read our Bibles and pray regularly, and spend time with other Christians, but we do not share our faith with others on a regular basis.

There are probably lots of reasons why this is, but **I think the most obvious is that we do not care about the lost the way that Jesus did.** Our heart does not ache knowing that many in our families, workplaces and community do not know God.

This Sunday is Palm Sunday, which remembers the day that Jesus entered into Jerusalem. It is the beginning of what we call the Holy Week that leads to Jesus' death and resurrection at the end of the week. As Jesus is entering into Jerusalem, the crowds are excited and waving palms before him. They are celebrating.

But they don't realize what it means yet, for Jesus to come for the lost. They think Jesus came just for them. To bring them political freedom, to conquer their enemies, and to raise them into power and authority. **They don't yet realize what Jesus expects of them.**

It wasn't that Jesus didn't come for them, but that he did not come just for them. He also came for their enemies . . . those people that despised them. And as they find this out and that surrendering and following Jesus is not so easy, they crucify him.

Jesus came to earth to not only save and restore us, but he came to show us the way. To be our example. **We need the heart of Jesus with respect to the lost. Those people in our lives that do not know God.**

In Matthew, Jesus says to his disciples, **“come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”**

Why are we here and what are we supposed to do? What is the purpose of life?

God has chosen to use human beings to make himself known in our world. And there is a world of people that do not know what it is to be in a right relationship with God.