



# Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 15:1-10

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## Lost and Found

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SERIES: *Understanding the Church*

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The refrain of that song says, "Break my heart with the things that break yours." Have you ever wondered what breaks God's heart? What causes him to worry and fret and even to grieve. Are these the same kinds of things that break my heart? Some of us have a hard time imagining God with these kinds of emotions, unless perhaps it's anger, but Scripture portrays him as a God who feels. Not only does God feel pain, he also feels joy. I've mentioned before that on my night stand I have a drawing of Jesus laughing. He's not just smiling, but really cracking up. His head is thrown back, his mouth is stretched open, his eyes are squinted. He's overcome, not just with laughter, but with joy. Have you ever wondered, what would make Jesus laugh like that? What really thrills the heart of God? Do I get thrilled by the same things?

This morning we're looking at a passage of Scripture that tells us both what breaks God's heart and what gives him joy. It also tells us something of why we so often don't share these same emotions; why we're so seldom found crying or laughing with him. How can we get in tune with the heart of God? The answer is found in two stories that Jesus told in Luke 15. These stories teach us that in order to share the Father's joy we first have to know what breaks his heart. Turn with me to Luke 15 where Luke gives the setting.

### A. THE JOYLESSNESS OF HUMAN PRIDE LK. 15:1-2

**"Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him.**

**Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"**

These two stories are born out of a situation of conflict and tension. Jesus is surrounded by the wrong kind of people here. Tax gatherers were different then than they are today. They weren't the official servants of the government, but private Jewish entrepreneurs hired by the Romans. They were what we call "filthy rich." They made their money primarily by overcharging and extortion. They were despicable people. They weren't just people who innocently ended up in a profession that was looked down upon. They were moral degenerates. And this is true of these so-called "sinners" as well. This was a term used for those who lived lives that were openly rebellious to the law of God. Often times they were engaged in professions that were dishonorable and involved immorality and dishonesty. If we were to look at this through twentieth century eyes, we'd see a few drug dealers among them; a gay couple, perhaps the owner of an adult book store; a few prostitutes. These weren't the kind of people you would want your daughter to date! Some of them probably had tattoos of Caesar on their arms. They wore black leather and drove Harley Davidson chariots. But, these were the people that Jesus attracted the most. These were the one's that Luke tells us **"came near to him to listen**

**to him."**

Standing by and watching all of this are the scribes and Pharisees. They, of course, were the upright, law-abiding, respectable citizens of Jesus' day. Contrary to what many people think, the Pharisees weren't religious professionals. They were people a lot like many of us. They were lay people who took their religion seriously. They were concerned that more and more people were straying from their biblical roots. In their minds, they were pointing people back to the Bible. So, we can understand why they raised their eyebrows when they saw the kind of people hanging around Jesus. But, it wasn't just this that got under their collar. Their complaint revolves around the fact that he received (welcomed) them and ate with them. This may not mean a whole lot to us, but in that culture receiving someone as your guest and sitting down at the table to eat with them is a sign of acceptance, honor, and even intimate friendship. These weren't just people he met with once in a while to see if he could convince them to change their ways, these were his friends! That's what bothered the scribes and the Pharisees.

If we really let it sink in, it will bother many of us as well. Let me draw a picture for you here that admittedly is a bit extreme, but I believe it illustrates what the Pharisees felt. Imagine yourself coming to my house for dinner with a few other invited guests. Immediately you notice a few unruly characters. One of the guys has brought his own bottle of tequila and is pouring shots at the bar. You go to use the bathroom and you walk in on a couple of guys doing a drug deal. As you walk back towards the party, you overhear someone talking rather loudly on the phone in the bedroom. It's clear he is making a large bet on the Giants game. When you rejoin the party, you're immediately propositioned by a suggestively dressed woman. And then when dinner rolls around, I stand up and honor each of these friends with a toast! Tell me, what would you think? Would you question my Christianity? I'm sorry to say that I probably would yours. But I really believe this is what it looked like to the Pharisees. We like to think that all these sinners had already cleaned up their act before they started to hang around Jesus. That fits much better with our theology.

You see, like the Pharisees, we have a very sophisticated rationale for not befriending sinners. Religiously, it's just not acceptable to befriend such people. As Christians, we feel that it might compromise our witness. Someone might get the wrong idea and think that since they're our friends, we do the same things they do, or at least that we think that it's okay. We couldn't let that happen. So we stay away. But, Jesus didn't stay away. He was willing to be implicated with sinners.

But then there's always the moral argument. Morally, we're afraid that if we get too close to these people, we might

actually become like them. I call this the "contamination theory." We view sinners as those with a bad case of the flu - if we get too close we might catch it. So we stay away. But, Jesus didn't stay away. And by the way, he never sinned either. He befriended them without engaging in their lifestyle.

There's another argument we bring up - a theological one. It's the argument based on what we know about God. "God is holy", we say. "He hates sin! It angers him. He can't allow it into his presence!" Of course, we never go so far as to say that God "hates sinners", but the practical result of our theology makes it look that way. We stay away - on theological grounds. But, once again, Jesus didn't stay away. And He was God! To study Him is to know what good theology is all about.

Most of us can see something of ourselves in the proud murmuring of the Pharisees. I think if you were to ask the average person in the world what Christians are like, they would say that we're angry, angry at them. But you don't see that here. And that's because so often our heart isn't being broken by the same thing that breaks God's. And this is the very thing that keeps us from sharing in Jesus' joy; from laughing and celebrating with Jesus as well. Because you see, at the very center of both the Lord's pain and joy is people. People like the one's hanging around Jesus. People break God's heart, and people give him joy. Jesus goes on to tell two stories to illustrate this.

## THE JOYFUL BURDEN OF DIVINE COMPASSION

### LK. 15:3-10

**"So He told them this parable, saying, 'What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!" I tell you that in the same way, 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, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and 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 which I had lost!" In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'"**

These two stories are very similar; so similar that they can best be seen as two in one. In each of them, Jesus weaves a brief story about losing, finding, and rejoicing. And in these two stories we see a stinging correction to the thinking and behavior which produces a "stay away" attitude towards sinners. At the heart of these stories is what I referred to earlier - theology. These two stories are primarily about God. There's no question that the central figure in each story, the shepherd in the first

and the woman in the second, are meant to teach us something about God. By the way, this would have offended the Pharisees right off the bat because they looked at both shepherds and women as inferior. But Jesus loved to "tweak" these guys. These stories teach us four things about God.

**1. God views sinners as lost:** First, they teach us that God views sinners primarily as lost. In our stories, both the sheep and the coin get lost. Jesus is changing our focus here. He's not focusing on the fact that they're sinners; he's focusing on the fact that they're lost. I don't know about you, but that changes the way I think and feel about them. When I think of someone as being lost, I'm prone towards compassion and pity. But when I think of them as sinners, I feel a little bit angry; I see them as worthy of condemnation.

The two items that get lost in these stories are worthy of consideration. A sheep gets separated from the flock, not by running away like a dog, but simply by wandering off. They don't mean to, they just wander off without realizing it. It usually happens as they're eating. They become so focused on the immediate need to eat and the grass in front of their nose that little by little they move away in the direction of more grass until finally they're separated from the flock and lost. People do that too. We follow the zest of the moment; focused intently on our present experience and our perceived needs. We don't intend to waste our lives; we just do what comes naturally to us. But, little by little, as we focus on our present satisfaction, we wander away and soon we're lost. And many times, like a sheep, we don't even know it.

Consider also the coin. The coin is an inanimate object. It makes no choices about its condition. It gets lost by the carelessness or forgetfulness of another. Years ago Lynn lost the diamond off her wedding ring. It just fell off. It wasn't the diamond's fault. It wasn't even her fault. You see, Jesus is reminding us that some people get lost at least partially by the circumstances of life or even the cruelty and neglect of other people. I have met many men and women who've had terrible things happen to them as children. And often times that has resulted in their own lostness. Like a coin, they've rolled away from the purpose from God. They didn't set out to be alcoholics or to have three marriages fail. They were just looking for fulfillment in the wrong places.

So if we're going to move from anger to compassion for people without Christ, then we need to change the way we look at them. We need to look at them the way God looks at them - as lost from the presence of God. I don't mean to say that they're not sinners, I simply mean to change our focus to be in accord with God's. He sees them primarily as lost, so should we.

**2. God views lost people as a personal loss to himself:** Second, these stories teach us that God views lost people as a personal loss to himself. They're not just lost, they are his loss. In each of these stories, something valuable or precious is lost from its rightful owner. The loss of just one sheep is always considered consequential. Even more so the loss of a coin. This women's coins represented the dowry that she would one day present to her husband. No doubt this dowry consisted of her life's savings. Students of eastern culture tell us that a dowry of ten coins would have been on the small side. She was probably a very poor woman. The loss of one coin would have been a disaster.

When just one person is lost, it breaks God's heart. How

do you feel when something precious or important is lost? I panic when I lose just my keys! How about your wallet? I recently met a guy who had his computer stolen, and he lost his entire doctoral thesis which was on that hard drive of that computer. He was devastated! How about some keepsake that belonged to a loved one? Think of the most precious thing you ever lost, and you might begin to get in touch with the loss God feels when just one member of the human race wanders off. God views lost people as a personal and painful loss to himself.

**3. God goes to great lengths to seek, find, and restore the lost:** It is because of this that we can make a third statement about God from this passage. God goes to great lengths to seek, find, and restore the lost. There are four little words that appear in both stories (vv. 4, 8) that I want you to notice: **"Until he (she) finds it."** Both the shepherd and the woman have no rest until they find that which they've lost. In the case of the one lost sheep, the shepherd left the other 99 to seek for it. In doing so, he would have been putting those 99 in great danger. But, that's not all. In going off by himself, he would have also been placing himself in great danger. There were all kinds of wild animals in the Judean wilderness; people didn't just go wandering around at night looking for something. But this one lost sheep is so precious to the shepherd that he's willing to risk all to find it.

On the other hand, with the woman, it's not the risk that is emphasized, but the intensity and thoroughness of the search. She lights a lamp to see better, she frantically sweeps the house, she carefully searches every nook and cranny. Every other care and concern is put on hold while she searches.

Have you ever considered that God is on a personal, risky, and intense hunt for lost people? That includes your neighbor, your coworkers, and that relative that so easily gets under your skin. There's no person so far away that God isn't still tracking them down. There is no person too far buried beneath the dirt of life that God isn't still sweeping to find. Have you ever considered that the events of people's lives, their problems and pains, their blessings and joys, are all part of the Master's search for them? He won't rest until he finds them. We talk about "seeker-sensitive" churches, but here we see who the real seeker is; it's not us, it's God! To be seeker sensitive is to be sensitive to him. He seeks lost people.

**4. God rejoices over the repentance of just one lost person:** This leads to the fourth thing this passage teaches about God. God and all heaven celebrates over the repentance of just one lost person. This idea of rejoicing and laughter is at the heart of each of these stories.

Consider this: when the shepherd found his sheep, it would have been lying on the ground unwilling to budge. That's what lost sheep do. The shepherd would have had to pick it up and shoulder the burden of carrying that sheep back home (no small task!). But, how does the shepherd react? Does he look at that sheep and say, "There you go again. You're such a pain in the neck! Can't you get your act together? Do you know what you just put me through?" No. Instead he picks it up, wraps it around his neck, and carries it home. He's not concerned about the burden; it says that he rejoices all the way. And when he gets home, he calls his friends together for a party to celebrate.

The woman does the same thing. And then when Jesus applies the parables he again focuses on this idea of celebration. He says all heaven breaks out in joy and laughter when one single

sinner repents. Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, "Why do you stand there complaining about the invitation list when heaven is celebrating?! Don't you see? You're out of tune with God! He's laughing, and he's inviting you to laugh, but you're angry, and all you can do is complain." I asked the question earlier: What makes Jesus laugh? I would propose to you that nothing thrills his heart more than when one single lost person is found.

You see, people break God's heart, lost people, and when those people are found they bring him joy. God views people who are without him not as scum or as sinners, but as lost. And not only are they lost, but they're a personal and painful loss to him. And so he takes great pains to seek, find, and restore them. And when he does, heaven throws the party to end all parties!

## CONCLUSION

For a number of weeks now we've been doing a series of studies on the church. We've talked about how the foundation of the church is the word of God, how the Lord leads the church through elders, how worship and prayer are central to who we are and what we do. But this morning I've begun talking about our real mission, what we call "the priority of God's plan." God's plan is to seek and to find lost people. It doesn't matter whether it's in our own neighborhood or remotest part of Africa. He seeks the lost, and when he finds them, heaven celebrates.

How does the church fit into this plan? Well, first of all, we're a community of lost people who've been found. It's very important we don't forget that. Otherwise, we become like the Pharisees - angry, proud of heart, joylessly standing on the fringe shaking our heads and wondering why we have to dirty our hands with lost people. In this story, Jesus speaks of the "ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Is that you? I've got news for you, there's no such thing. You see, some people have to repent of their badness, others might have to repent of their goodness because their goodness has made them proud and kept them detached from the heart of God.

But as a community of people who once were lost and now are found, what do we do? The question this story poses to us is this: Will we join with him in his passionate search for lost people? Will we be sensitive to what the real seeker is doing? On one occasion, Jesus was walking through various cities and villages, teaching and healing, and Matthew tells us, **"And seeing the multitudes, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd."** Do you see it? God's heart is breaking for the lost. But what does Jesus do with that? Listen to the next verses: **"Then He said to His disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.'"** You see, he calls us to be his hands and his feet in searching for the lost.

The problem is that most of us prefer staying with the flock. But if we're going to seek the lost then we have to leave the flock. We have to leave our comfort zones and our holy huddles and go to places where we don't feel very safe. That's why it's so important that we don't have so much going on as a church family that we don't have time to be with lost

people. The problem for some of us isn't that we're unequally yoked with unbelievers, it's that we're simply out of touch with them. And that's because we're never with them. We don't like to frequent the places where they frequent. And if we're with them, we don't really listen to them. We don't take time to hear their stories and feel their pain. To seek the lost we have to leave the flock.

The name Norma McCorvey probably doesn't mean anything to you. But the pseudonym that Norma McCorvey used in the Supreme Court case in which she was the plaintiff you'll recognize - Jane Roe, of *Roe versus Wade*, the infamous decision in 1973 that legalized abortion. In 1969 Norma was working for a carnival when she discovered she was pregnant. She asked a doctor to give her an abortion and was surprised to find it was against the law. She sought help elsewhere and was recruited as the plaintiff in *Roe versus Wade* by two attorneys seeking to overturn the law against abortion. After the case, she remained anonymous for a decade or so, but then she went public.

Shaking, but fortified by vodka and valium, she told a Dallas television reporter she was Jane Roe of *Roe v. Wade*. She admitted she had lied about that pregnancy in the hope it would help her get an abortion: It was a casual affair that made her pregnant, not rape as she told her Roe lawyers. And, little by little, through occasional interviews, sporadic speaking engagements and a 1989 television movie, she revealed that before she gave birth to the Roe baby and gave her to adoptive parents, she had given birth to two other children, had been in a long-term lesbian relationship, and had spent long nights drinking and dealing drugs in Dallas dives.

But then something happened that changed her life forever. She had gone to work answering phones for a Dallas abortion clinic. Next door to the clinic a pro-life group leased an office. More importantly, she often ran into a seven-year-old girl named Emily, the daughter of an pro-life volunteer. Emily greeted McCorvey each day with a hug, and then she invited her to church. On July 22, 1995, she attended a Saturday night church service in Dallas. It was at that service that the Lord touched her. She kept praying and crying that she wanted to undo all the evil she had done in this world.

In August of 1995 she announced she had become a Christian and was baptized in a swimming pool in front of ABC "World News Tonight" television cameras. Says McCorvey, "I still feel very badly. I guess I always will ... but I know I've been forgiven."

And Jesus says when that sort of thing happens, heaven rejoices, angels and maybe even God, laughs. And it happened because one little seven-year-old girl named Emily stepped out of her comfort zone to hug a person everyone else was angry at and viewed as an enemy and to invite her to church.

In order to know the Father's joy we have to know what breaks his heart. Lost people break his heart. **"But, I tell you the truth, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."**

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