



What Moves God's Heart?

When I was about 10 years old I had a dog named Heidi. Heidi didn't have a pedigree. She was a strange mix of terrier and wiener dog. She looked kind of like a short haired cat with a curly tail. And I loved that little dog. We had had other family animals and pets, but Heidi was different... Heidi was MY dog. She belonged to me. And I remember that it was so much fun to come home after school and be greeted by this animal that was out of control with excitement. She would shake from head to toe and jump straight up and down when I walked in the door. But one day, I guess I was the first one home, I knew something was wrong as soon as I stuck my key in the door. I just had the sinking feeling when I didn't hear any whirlwind of excitement charging down the hall to jump at me when I came inside.

And to this day I'm not sure how it happened. We think it might have been a careless meter reader, but the gate was left wide open and Heidi was no where to be found. I panicked, and jumped on my orange sting ray bike with the banana seat and frantically road around the neighborhood calling out, "Heidi, Heidi." The next day we did a more thorough search of the neighborhood. Going door to door asking questions, trying to find out if anyone had seen her roaming the streets. We put up posters and made phone calls. We checked the humane society twice a week. Once we even got a call that they had found her and we couldn't control our excitement when we went down to the pound but it wasn't her. She was lost, no where to be found. And my 10 year old heart filled with anxiety, disappointment and grief. For months I fantasized about waking up one day hearing her bark in the back yard. Or, like Lassie, I'd find her down by the creek and though she could hardly move she would shake for joy when I came near. Days turned into weeks, weeks to months. But I continued the search.

There are many things that I've lost since I was 10 years old. I lost a pocket knife once. A few sweaters, a jacket or two. I manage to loose my keys or my glasses about once a week. But it strikes me that the passion and energy of my search is dependent on the value I place on that which is lost. I might spend a few minutes looking for a sock, or even a couple of hours looking for a sweater. But Heidi was so precious to me, there wasn't anything that would hold me back. My sting ray and I were on an all out search, a rescue mission to bring her home. It's true isn't it? We are moved to action when something of great personal value is lost.

And so I want to ask this morning: What moves the heart of God? What does God so personally treasure that it causes Him to passionately search; to go running through the streets, calling out names, knocking on doors?

This morning we're going to return to the parables of Jesus. As Brian Pierce pointed out a few weeks ago, the Parables reveal to us something about the Kingdom of God. And

about the priorities and values of God's own heart. So please turn with me this morning to Luke 15 beginning with verses 1-2.

"Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"

I. God Treasures the Lowly.

The first thing we see about what moves the heart of God is not in anything that Jesus says, but it's how He lives and who He hangs out with. You see, Jesus had this annoying habit of welcoming the losers of society. The disciples were often frustrated by who Jesus chose to befriend. Because for an up and coming political figure in those days, it was not good press to be seen with losers and misfits. And it's not that he just casually made contact either, which would have been bad enough. No, it says that he "received them" or "welcomed them." Which probably means that he actually invited them home or wherever he was staying. You see, unlike us, Jesus valued and was attracted to losers and misfits. He deliberately chose to hang with the "out-crowd" and to shun the prim and proper religion keepers of His day. It says that "he ate with them." That was a gesture of close friendship and honor. Back then relationships happened around the table, food was mingled with the conversation of close friendships. So the scandalous charge here against Jesus is this, "Jesus, you sir are a friend of sinners and tax collectors!"

This charge comes of course from the Pharisees and scribes. They were the religious superstars of the day. If you happened to see a Pharisee on the street you'd take notice. Something inside of you would become a little nervous and unsettled. I was getting into my car several months ago and I recognized one of the Giants starting pitchers, Kurt Rueter, getting into the car next to me. I really wanted to be cool to make sure he didn't know that I knew he was somebody. So I sort of gave him a cool little wave... Well, seeing a Pharisee would be like that. They were somebody's. You took notice. Their opinions mattered.

In Jesus' day these were the good guys. They were men of great religious integrity and passion. They were men of prayer, students of the word, they lived modest lives of devotion and service. So when the Pharisees grumbled everyone listened. And this time they were grumbling about Jesus' little habit of making friends with the losers and the lowly.

They couldn't believe it. And you know what? If we had been there we'd find it hard to believe too. It's scandalous. Jesus having lunch with tax collectors. These are rough, unscrupulous men with deep pockets of cash, driving around in

shiny new hummers they bought with the money they extorted from the poor and from their own people. They weren't the "down and outers," they were the "up and outers." They were the worst kind of crooks, the kind who would cheat their own mother if they could make a few bucks.

And then there's the "sinners." These were folks on the absolute bottom rung. Defeated men and women, many without moral foundations. I bet there were a few hookers and a couple of pimps among them. Maybe a drag queen or two, a few drug dealers, the lady who sleeps on the corner with one hand on her shopping cart, the guy who sells kiddie porn over the internet. They were all there.

I think this is a shocking crowd for an up and coming Messiah to be hanging around with, don't you? So the Pharisees grumble, and I think if we're honest it's a little unsettling to us as well. And the stage is set. Jesus: Friend of Sinners, settles in among this colorful collection of misfits; with the Pharisees listening in, and tells these scandalous stories about the heart of God. So let's pick it up starting in verse 3.

"And 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? And 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? And 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.""

II. God's Heart is Moved by the Helplessness of the Lost.

Now I'm told that sheep are characterized by three "D's;" they're dumb, defenseless, and directionally challenged. You'll never see an act of trained sheep at a circus. They're too dumb. They have no claws, or quills, or protective shell. They are without any natural defense. And like many of us, they are clueless when it comes to direction. Every once in a while you'll hear a heart warming story about a dog or a cat that has found its way home. But never a sheep. Once they are lost they will never make it back. After a long day in the field the shepherd of 100 sheep brings them home and starts the count... 97, 98, 99.. Hey where's Gertrude? I haven't seen her since lunch time. And so He takes off, leaving the rest behind. The story doesn't give us much detail here. Some think he would have made arrangements for the other 99 to be cared

for. But it seems to me that the shepherd is like an anxious dad who can't find his toddler in a crowded mall. He's not deliberating and thinking, he's moving. His feet have taken off through the sheer concern of his heart to find that which is lost. There are great dangers in the woods, a lost sheep could be in big trouble. Without any defenses they are helpless and without hope.

The second thing we see in these stories is this: God's heart is moved by the helpless condition of the lost. Jesus gives us a tender picture of what it really means to be lost and helpless. You see, sheep don't deliberately run away and get themselves lost. No, they just get preoccupied. They start feeding on one little clump of grass and then another, then another, and pretty soon they are hopelessly and dangerously disoriented. They couldn't even tell you how they got there. And they certainly couldn't retrace their steps or find their own way home. Preoccupied with the immediate things of life they have aimlessly wandered away. Maybe that's you this morning, You've been so preoccupied with yourself, your ambitions, your desires, your career, your relationships and appetites that you've turned around and realized you're just miles away from the shepherd this morning. Your life is a mess and you're helpless to find your own way home.

There is another kind of lostness in these stories that is even more profound. It's the lostness of the coin. The coin is lost not by wandering away but by the carelessness or neglect of the owner. I know many who have lived through unspeakable things, and because of the abuse of others, or because of the abandonment or carelessness of those who should have cared for them, they have built high walls of defense and suspicion against anything to do with God. And You should know, God is familiar with the whole of your journey this morning, and the heart of God weeps for you. God's heart is moved by the helplessness of those who are lost.

And so God is on the move. In fact God is on an unstoppable search for the lost.

III. God is on an Unstoppable Search for the Lost.

Look again at the shepherd for a minute in verse 4. Something inside compels him to leave the others, to search, to go and go and go until? Until he gets tired and gives up? Or until the sun goes down and the woods become too dangerous? No! It says he searches and searches until what? Until he has found it. You see, God is on a passionate, unstoppable search and rescue mission for His dear and precious ones to come home.

We also see this in the woman's relentless search for her coin. This is most likely one of the coins that made up her wedding dowry. This was something of huge emotional and sentimental value. And so she turns the house upside down. Have you ever done that? I have to admit I'm really not a very good finder of things around the house. My wife will quickly point this out after she tells me for the tenth time, "Well it's there, you just need to look harder." I hate when she's always right. But the other day I tore into the clutter in my garage in search of something of tremendous personal and emotional value - my cordless drill! I know that's not a big loss for most of you ladies out there. But to a lot of us guys a cordless drill beats a wedding dowry any day! Anyway, I couldn't find it. And the longer I looked the more determined I became. The more clutter I overturned the louder I got. But I would not give up. The woman lights a lamp and sweeps the house until when..."until she finds it."

God is on a search and he is out to rescue that which is lost. In fact, look at what the text says: It says that when the shepherd finds the lost sheep, he hoists it on his shoulders. We're talking 70 pounds of dirty smelly animal here. And as He lifts it up on his shoulders there's a smile on his face. The text says, "he rejoices." Can you imagine that? What would you do? I know what many of us parents would do. We'd be relieved at first but then the sermons would come. "That was a dumb thing to do, getting lost out there like that. Do you know what you put me through? I was looking all night for you. What were you thinking?" But the shepherd doesn't scold or shame, he picks up the sheep and he rejoices all the way home

IV. God Celebrates When the Lost are Found.

And when he gets home, it says the party begins! He calls his friends and neighbors and says "rejoice with me for I have found my sheep which was lost." He says, "hey come on over, we're going to party tonight because my lost sheep has been found!"

Jesus then throws open the curtain of Heaven and says these earthly celebrations are only shadows of the Party in Heaven. In fact we might want to call these Party Parables! Jesus says in verse 7,

"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."

After the woman calls her friends and neighbors and begins her party, Jesus says in verse 10: "I tell you there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

That's great news for the lost, isn't it. Max Lucado writes, "Let one child consent to be dressed in righteousness and begin the journey home and heaven pours the punch, strings the streamers, and throws the confetti... when a soul is saved, the heart of Jesus becomes the night sky on the Fourth of July, radiant with explosions of cheer." But there is only one way into this celebration and that's the way of repentance.

Most of the time we think of this word "repentance" as a weighty theological term having to do with a change, a midcourse correction, requiring us to act upon a new moral directive that redirects the course of our lives. Certainly repentance has to do with our turning to God. But look again for a moment at these two stories. What did the sheep do to repent? Did he turn around? Did he change his course and wander back? No, all the sheep could manage to do, as dumb and defenseless and directionless as he is, was get absolutely and hopelessly lost. That's all the sheep could do; the shepherd did the rest. And what about the coin. The coin is in an even more desperate situation it seems to me. All the coin could do is wait in the dark and the dirt. Wait until the light was lit and the dirt was swept. It's the woman in the story who takes the initiative. She is the one who seeks and finds and celebrates. This is a new thought for me but I think repentance, particularly as it is portrayed here, is simply allowing myself to be found. Admitting that on my own I'm without hope and helplessly lost. Surrendering myself to the rescue of God in my life.

The boss of a big company needed to call one of his employees about an urgent problem with one of the main

computers. He dialed the employees' home telephone number and was greeted with a child's whispered, "Hello?"

The boss asked, "Is your Daddy home?"

"Yes," whispered the small voice.

"May I talk with him?" the man asked.

To the boss' surprise, the small voice whispered, "No."

The boss persisted, "Is your Mommy there?"

"Yes," came the answer.

"May I talk with her?"

Again, the small voice whispered, "No."

"Well, is there someone else there I might talk to?"

the boss asked the child.

"Yes," whispered the child, "a policeman."

"Well then, may I speak with the policeman?"

"No," whispered the child. "He is busy."

"Busy doing what?" asked the boss.

"Talking to daddy and mommy and the fireman," came the whispered answer.

Now the boss was growing concerned and just then he heard what sounded like a helicopter through the ear piece on the phone, the boss asked, "What is that noise?"

"A hello-copper," answered the whispering voice.

Alarmed, the boss nearly shouted, "What is going on there?"

In an awed whispering voice, the child answered, "The search team just landed the hello-copper!"

"Why are they there?"

There was a muffled giggle as the child said, "They are looking for me!"

If you are lost this morning, if you are like that directionless sheep or the coin that's been tucked away in the darkness and dirt, know that Jesus is looking for you. He's been on an all out search for you your whole life long. And perhaps he's brought you here today so that heaven can pour the punch and start the party as you simply allow yourself to be hoisted upon His shoulders, no matter how dirty or lost you may feel. Come the way of repentance and allow Jesus to carry you home today.

V. The Lostness of Religious Pride.

But while these stories bring tremendous comfort to the lost. Remember Jesus is also confronting the grumbling hearts of the Pharisees. And in case you hadn't noticed Jesus is poking fun at the Pharisees when he mentions the 99 persons who need not repentance. You know what, they don't exist. But the Pharisees represent yet another kind of lostness. It's the lostness of religious pride. It's the lostness of the self successful and self sufficient. The kind that says I'm doing all right on my own thank you. I've got my religion and my earthly successes. I'm not on the bottom, I don't belong in the same category as the rest.

But God is only searching for the lost. God is looking and calling and lighting and sweeping... passionately, relentlessly on the move until he finds and rescues and brings the lost ones safely home. For the losers and misfits, tax gatherers and sinners and for the self sufficient, self successful, the way to the party is the same. It's always the way of repentance. Admitting that I am hopelessly and helplessly lost on my own.

CONCLUSION

God loves the lowly. His heart is moved by the helplessness of the lost. God is on an unstoppable search and rescue. And Heaven throws a party to beat all parties when one lost soul repents and is carried home.

But what about us? What moves my heart? What stirs me to action? What causes me to enter into so much celebration?

I've got to admit this is where these stories have gotten under my skin the last few weeks. And I know I need to be careful here because many of us, including myself, have been exposed to sermons that have exhorted us to evangelize through guilt motivation. I've been buried with great shame at times when it comes to seeking and saving the lost. So I don't want to add a burden that isn't of the Lord this morning. But it's important for us to ask from time to time; especially those of us who have been walking with the Lord for years now. Do I have room in my heart and in my life for the lowly and the outcasts? Is my heart still moved by the helplessness and the hopelessness of the lost? Do the priorities of my life reflect the heart of the shepherd who is on a relentless unstoppable search for His dear and precious ones to come home? And does my heart still burn to be a part of the party, to celebrate with angels at the homecoming of one lost soul?

Tony Campolo once found himself sitting in a diner in Honolulu at 3:30 in the morning when in came eight provocative and boisterous prostitutes who crowded on either side of his little booth. He felt completely out of place but just about the time he was ready to make an exit, the woman to his right said to her friend. "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be thirty-nine". Her "friend" responded in a nasty tone. "Well what do you expect me to do, throw you a party or something? You want me to get you a cake and sing Happy Birthday?"

"I don't expect you to do anything. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I've never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?"

Campolo writes: When I heard that I made a decision. I sat and waited until the women had left. Then I called over to the guy behind the counter (Harry was his name) and said, "Hey Harry, do they come in here every night?"

"Yeah." he answered.

"The one right next to me, does she come here every night?"

"Yeah!" he said. "That's Agnes. Why d'ya wanna know?"

"Because I heard her say that tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for Agnes right here tomorrow night?" Harry thought that was great idea. He even pitched in to bake the cake.

So at 2:30 the next morning I returned to the diner with crepe paper decorations and a big sign that said "Happy Birthday Agnes." The word must have gotten out because by 3:15 every prostitute in Honolulu was in the

place. It was wall to wall prostitutes... and me. At 3:30 the door of the diner swung open and in came Agnes and her friend. I had everybody ready (after all, I was kind of the M.C. of the affair) and when they came in we all screamed, "Happy Birthday."

Never have I seen a person so flabbergasted, so stunned. Her mouth fell open. Her legs seemed to buckle. Her friend grabbed her arm and as she was led to sit on the stool as we sang Happy Birthday and her eyes moistened. But when the birthday cake with all the candles on it was carried out, she lost it and just openly cried.

Harry gruffly mumbled, "Blow out the candles, Agnes! Come on ! Blow them out or I'm gonna hafta do it." And after an endless few seconds, he did. The he handed her the knife and said, "Cut the cake, Agnes. Yo, Agnes, we all want some cake."

Agnes looked down at the cake. Then without taking her eyes off it, she slowly and softly said, "Look, Harry, is it ok if... I mean could I... would it be all right, if we didn't eat it right away. Is it all right with you if I keep the cake for a little while?" Harry said, "Sure, keep the cake, take it home if you wanna."

"Can I?"... then turning to me she said, "I just live down the street. I'll be right back, I promise." She got off the stool and picked up the cake like it was the Holy Grail and walked slowly toward the door. When the door closed there was a stunned silence in the place. Not knowing what to do, I broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?" It's kind of a crazy idea now looking back but at the time it just seemed the right thing to do. So I prayed for Agnes. I prayed for her salvation. I prayed that her life would be changed and that God would be good to her.

When I finished, Harry leaned over the counter and with a trace of hostility he said, "Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of a church do you belong to?"

In one of those moments when just the right words come, I answered, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for whores at 3:30 in the morning."

Harry waited a moment and then almost sneered as he answered, "No you don't. There's no church like that. Cause if there was I'd join it. I'd join a church like that!"

So what about us? What about Central Peninsula Church? As we close this morning, I think this is an appropriate word for us today. Particularly in light of the vision that was set before us last week. This is a critical question for us to be asking ourselves. How will we as a church over the next five years open our hearts to the lowly? Will we spend time with misfits and outcasts? And will we join God in the search for lost souls on the Peninsula? Will our one passion and delight remain focused on the party, the laughter in heaven as men and women are hoisted on the Savior's back and carried safely home?

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