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Understanding the Heart of God
Luke 15:1-10

It's hard to believe, but it happened again. Air Asia's Flight 8501 carrying 162 passengers and crew disappeared for 72 hours on an expectedly routine flight over Indonesia's Java Sea. For distraught family members and friends, the disappearance recalls the nightmare of last March 8th, when Malaysian Airline's Flight 370 disappeared over the Indian Ocean. Once again, we witnessed the shock and disbelief, and fragile hopes dashed, leaving tears and utter sadness.

Nothing is more precious than a human life. That's why Ferguson, MO erupts after the death of Michael Brown and why more than 10,000 police gather to pay their respects to Officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos. Black lives matter, as do the lives of our first responders. We mourn every life lost, even while each case needs to be judged on its own unique circumstances.

Jesus believes deeply that every human being deserves dignity, love and care. So He touches the running sores of lepers, when rabbinic law forbids lepers to come within fifty feet of another human being. When respectable people decline the invitation in the parable of the Great Banquet, the Master orders his servant, *"Go out quickly and bring in the poor, crippled, blind and the lame."* Bring in the riff-raff and those whose infirmities are blamed on their supposed sin.

Jesus balances grace and responsibility telling the adulterous woman, *"I do not condemn you; go and sin no more."* He invites a five-time divorced Samaritan woman to find the living water that will quench her thirst for love and acceptance. He even eats with scorned prostitutes and hated tax collectors.

So Jesus can't overlook the muttering of the Pharisees and tax collectors who scornfully disapprove of his table fellowship, *"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* It's Shocking! Undignified! Unrighteous! and Wrong! But tragically these religious scholars, who study God's word all their lives, lack any understanding of God's heart!

So Jesus, as recorded in Luke 15, the theological center of Luke's gospel, offers three parable about losing things of growing value - a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost or Prodigal Son. Jesus offers these parables because an ancient Jewish meal is more than an occasion of warmth and hospitality. What enrages the Pharisees is that Jesus doesn't just eat with sinners; He hosts the dinners. Since every meal anticipates the great Messianic banquet, Jesus, is offering salvation to the riff-raff, tax collectors and prostitutes. How dare He!

For the Pharisees, this isn't merely inviting an annoying IRS agent to dinner, along with a misguided co-ed who earns her way through school by doing a few tricks on the side. It's Jesus befriending the crack dealer who turns your eighth grader onto drugs, or the investment counselor who pilfers your retirement savings, or the scumbag who does some dumpster diving in your driveway and steals your identity. Where does Jesus get off offering this cheap grace, this "get out of jail free" card, when we religious people do things right and keep our lives on the straight and narrow? But let's listen to what Jesus has to say:

Luke 15:1-10

These three parables see life from God's perspective. A shepherd loses one of his hundred sheep. Sheep get lost because, like driven workaholics, they don't look up. They nibble their way over a hill, finally raise their heads, and if the herd is out of sight, they're lost. Sheep are vulnerable. So the shepherd rushes out, searching high and low, until he finds it. Carrying it home, he rejoices, "I've found my sheep." And Jesus concludes, *"Heaven rejoices more over a repentant sinner, than over ninety-nine righteous people who don't need to repent."*

Or, says Jesus, a poor Palestinian woman loses a dowry coin from her headdress, the most valuable thing she owns. The coin slips down between the stones of her home, where it's almost impossible to find. What will her father or husband say? Mary Ann's wedding ring once had a broken tine, so wanting to surprise her, I take it to a jewelry store to get it fixed. I can have it back by noon. But Mary Ann calls me in a tearful panic, *"I can't find my wedding ring. Did you move it?"* So much for good husbandly intentions that go awry!

So this Palestinian woman lights a lamp and scours every square inch of her home, until . . . praise God, she finds the coin. Joyfully she calls to her neighbors, "Rejoice. I've found my lost coin." So Jesus concludes, *"In the same way, the angels of God rejoice over one sinner who repents."*

Or, says Jesus, a man has two sons. Tim Keller calls the older brother, the moral conformist. He's the duty-bound, hard-working, straight-arrow who says, *"The problem in our world is immorality. These sinful people just need to clean up their act."* Keller calls the younger brother, the advocate of self-discovery. He's the carefree, rule-breaking non-conformist, who says, *"The problem with our world is close-minded bigotry. Let's quit judging and do more accepting."*

You know the story. The youngest, with unspeakable disrespect, says, in effect, "Dad, drop dead! Give me my share of the inheritance." And he blows it all in "riotous living," and ends up on a rotten career path for a respectable Jewish lad - -- slopping hogs. So he limps home, not necessarily out of repentance, but because he's hungry, knowing what custom demands. His father will drag him out in front of the entire village, raise a pottery vase above his head, and will smash it to the ground, expressive of the broken relationship. Then the father can

exile the son forever or make him the lowest household slave. He'll never again be a true son! But what happens? As the son rehearses his repentance speech, the father sees him, rushes out, throws his arms around him, and shouts, *"Let's kill the fatted calf (enough for the whole village) and celebrate, for my son who was dead is alive again; he who was lost is found!"*

We love this parable because of its unexpected grace that we can really, really screw up, and if we repent, God will take us back. But we forget that this parable isn't addressed to prodigals, but to good, righteous, law-abiding, Bible-reading, but hard-hearted Pharisees who wonder why Jesus isn't straightening out these sinners who flock to him. This older brother is also estranged from his father. In this patriarchal culture, when the father throws a feast for the younger son, the older son should attend, keep face, and take up the issue with his father later. But he doesn't. He shames his father!

So even if we're reading our Bibles, saying our prayers, and coming to church, we can get just as lost as the prodigal. In fact, the older son ends up worse off. The prodigal knows that he's sinned, that he's wasted his life and inheritance. But the older brother feels morally superior; he wants everyone to know that he's better than his degenerate brother. When his younger brother gets the party, despite his righteousness, he gets angry. Wouldn't you?

Chuck and I are preaching a three-week series of sermons on "Becoming an Inviting Congregation." We do a pretty good job of welcoming visitors and guests when they come to us. We befriend and care for friends and neighbors in need. What we don't do well is to take the initiative, to pray for our friends and family that they have a spiritual hunger and curiosity, to risk talking about issues of faith, and gasp, to invite them to our small group, or church activity, or worship.

But think of our parables. Notice the prominence of joy. The shepherd shouts, *"Rejoice, I've found my lost sheep."* The woman is exultant, *"Rejoice, I've found my lost coin."* The father invites the whole town to the best tailgate party ever, *"For my son who was dead is alive; he who was lost is found."* God longs to love us, and to enlist us in His mission of healing and transforming our world.

I think of what Jesus does in my life. His unconditional love is my rock and my foundation; it tells me that I'm important, that my self-worth doesn't depend on our net-worth or on how you received my last sermon. Jesus' word guides me so I can stay positive and focused, so I can forgive and not waste energy on negativity, so I find the adventure of reaching out beyond my comfort zone, watching us dig wells in Malawi, build friendships in Cuba, support girls' education in Pakistan, or teach ESL to New Americans. Jesus' word helps me keep money and things in proper perspective. When I pray, I find strength and peace and hope, and even patience, definitely not an attribute for which I'm wired. We invite hoping others will discover the joy that we have found in Jesus.

Notice in our parables that the “lost” are precious. A sheep is valuable; a dowry coin even more so; and a son is most precious of all. So we don’t think of those outside our fellowship, as many Christians do, as sinners, backsliders, or the reprobate who need to get their act together and get saved.

Because if it is our child who is lost or hurting, we will spare no effort to find them and help them. In Erik’s sophomore year of college, in the midst of a crushing course load, within two weeks, a close friend committed suicide, his favorite professor died of a heart attack while playing tennis, he and his girlfriend broke up, and he tore his ACL which threatened his plans to spend his junior year in Germany. Erik was all I could think about. We invite others because each person is precious.

What’s startling about the first two parables is that the sheep and the coin do nothing to be found. The shepherd and the woman search, not the sheep and the coin. So we don’t so much seek God, as God seeks us. Francis Thompson describes God as a Hound of Heaven from whom he tries to flee. He speaks of his life going awry, “My mangled youth lies dead beneath the heap.” But then God stretches out a hand, and he realizes, “I am the one you seek.”

We often think, “When I get my act together, when I pray and I’m good and together, then God will love me and accept me.” Or we try to find God. But God’s isn’t lost; we are. So as one writer puts it, “When God becomes the center of our universe, and our life revolves around Him, we discover: God is not in my world; I am in His.”

So while it is comforting to think of ourselves as a lost sheep, as the one Jesus rescues when we’re in trouble, Jesus is telling us – be the shepherd, or the diligent sweeper, searching for those who are hurting. So who is lonely? Who is afraid? Who is sick? Who is troubled? Who is at the end of her rope? Who is facing a crisis? Who can’t go on much longer? Who’s facing foreclosure? Who’s drinking too much? Who is getting off the straight and narrow?

Or conversely, if we have a friend or family member for whom life right now is great, we remind them, “We are disciples who are daring to make a difference!” We’d love to have you join us.

What’s often noticed about the parable of the Prodigal Son is that we don’t know how it ends. The father goes out to the older brother and invites him to come in and join the feast. But does he or doesn’t he? We don’t know, so we need to write the ending ourselves. So if we’re lost right now, trust the Father’s grace and come home? God will welcome you with open arms. If we see someone heading for the far country, care enough to go after them. That’s what the older brother should have done for his younger brother! If we’re feeling morally superior, let us repent of our pride, which is the deadliest of the sins, for it tempts us to live

without God altogether. If the Father opens His arms to receive a prodigal, why can't we! And to our neighbors and friends, we let's begin to practice the art of invitation. We can say this, "God is throwing a banquet, and we'd love to have you join us."