

## **“Lost and Found”**

### **Luke 15:1-10**

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Maddie McCann has been missing for over four months. She was on vacation with her family in Portugal when she vanished. She is three years old.

Steve Fossett, the sixty-three year old aviator that has set ninety-three aviation world records, was last seen on Labor Day. The plane he was flying over the Nevada desert never returned to the airport.

These are the latest names added to the list of missing persons. They join the six miners in Utah that have not been found after an explosion. We have grown accustomed to hearing about people that are missing and the extraordinary efforts to find them.

Searching for lost people is the theme of our text today. Luke shares two of Jesus' parables that emphasize this theme. One is about a shepherd looking for a sheep that has wandered away and the other is about a woman that turns her house upside down searching for a lost coin. Both were determined to find what was lost and when they did, they threw parties to celebrate.

**Why did Jesus tell these parables?** They were a disturbing response to the criticism he received from the scribes and Pharisees because he associated with tax collectors and sinners.

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man eats with sinners and welcomes them’” Luke 15:1-2. Actually, he did more than eat with them. In all likelihood, he hosted this dinner.

Obviously, Jesus was not meeting their expectations. Didn't he know that he was to have no contact with sinners? In their world, the scribes and Pharisees did not buy, sell, trade or lend money to sinners. They did not eat or travel with them, either. They avoided all contact with them and believed that there was joy in heaven over every sinner that perished. This was such a contrast to what Jesus believed and the way he lived, revealed again in these two parables.

No doubt the parables themselves added to the Pharisees' disgust. According to Dr. Alan Culpepper, referring to God as Israel's shepherd was common in the Old Testament, but not in Jesus' time. Shepherds had acquired a bad reputation by the first century as shiftless, thieving, trespassing hirelings. Shepherding was listed among the despised trades by the rabbis. So you can imagine how the Pharisees bristled when Jesus told a story that cast God in the role of a shepherd.

Similarly, Jesus used a story about a poor woman to contrast the grudging spirit of the Pharisees to God's gracious spirit. This, too, would offend the religious leaders and cause them to murmur even more.

**The religious leaders were right about one thing, however, and wrong about another.** Some of the people Jesus spent time with were scoundrels. For the most part, tax collectors were crooks. They could levy any amount of tax they wanted upon the citizens, paying Rome their due and pocketing the rest.

The sinners referred to in this story were those who did not maintain ritual purity practiced by the Pharisees or were known violators of Moses' law. They had their name printed in the paper under the court section and everyone knew what they did wrong. As a result, they were shunned in the community and excluded from participating in the synagogue.

They were wrong, however, about how God viewed “sinners.” He did not look upon them with contempt as the religious leaders did. Instead, He had compassion upon them and pursued them like any parent would look for a lost child.

According to Jesus, God is not eager to condemn, judge and destroy sinners, which include all people, but redeem them. He recklessly and frantically pursues those that others have given up on and rejoices when He finds them.

Jesus modeled this as he became the advocate of those not considered “in” by the prevailing religious attitude of his time. Finding any lost person became a priority for him, too, as this story reveals.

**How does this text speak to us today?** It does so in more ways than time will allow me to address. I am intrigued by the questions it raises for us to consider beyond this hour.

Why is it so hard for people to admit mistakes and repent? Maybe it is because there are too many Pharisees in our world with harsh, critical, begrudging spirits. Grace and mercy are the prerequisites to reconciliation and celebration.

How do we as believers, like the scribes and Pharisees, contribute to others’ “lostness” by our self-righteous attitudes that promote division and strife? What barriers do we erect that keep people out of a loving and influential community of faith?

How can we impact a lost world unless we take risks, get out of our comfort zones, meet people on their turf, listen to their stories and build bridges of goodwill and understanding rather than walls of separation and alienation? Who needs us to be their advocate, sharing their concerns and needs?

I think you would agree that each set of questions could be the focus of a sermon. I’ll save them for another time.

Here’s what this passage says to me today that I would like to share with you, though. I need a God like Luke describes and a church that follows His lead.

**What kind of God does Luke write about in this passage?** He describes a God that notices when someone is missing from the community of faith and moves heaven and earth to find him or her. It is obvious that Luke believes in a God that is unwilling to sacrifice the few for the many, cut his losses and go on as others might do. He considers no one insignificant and disposable. He will never grow weary and give up His search because in the Kingdom of God, everyone matters and everyone counts.

**Why do we need a God like this?** The time may come when we will be the one lost and alone in a dangerous and scary world, and we need to know that God will notice and care. We need to know He will come searching and not rest until He brings us safely home. When most of us read these parables, don’t we see ourselves as one of the ninety-nine sheep safely in the fold or the nine coins that can be accounted for? I think so. What if this changes and we find ourselves on the outside? Doesn’t it comfort and encourage you to know that God is coming after you? It does me.

The search for the lost miners at the Crandall Canyon Mine in Utah has ended, but the discussion has not. “Did We Do Enough?” is the title of articles and blogs about this decision to call off the search, especially after three more miners died trying to rescue the six men trapped in the original explosion. Of course, family members were unwilling to call off the search and pleaded for the authorities to continue. All of us mourn for them and agonize with them.

According to Luke, God will never call off the search for His missing children. He will not quit and His willingness to search is not dependent upon their behavior, whether they have been good or bad. It is not dependent upon whether they wandered away on their own, rebelled and left in anger or were pushed out of the fold. His desire to search for them is dependent upon one thing, the fact that they are His children and he loves them unconditionally.

**I like Luke’s image of God and need Him. I also need to be a part of a church that models this type of unconditional love.** I need a church that notices when I am missing and comes looking for me, too.

Theologian Tom Ehrich has moved from North Carolina to New York City. He writes about being surrounded by people with little sense of being among them. “What happens when something goes wrong?” he ponders. “What happens when illness strikes, the job gets stressful, worries mount, extended family suffers and clouds come, as they always do? We tend to need people then. Like the coin and the sheep, we need to be found. When spirits sag or fortunes sour,

we need someone to search for us until they find us. How does this happen in a bustling city where one is unlikely to be noticed as absent or troubled?"

He faces these questions with two beliefs. One is that God will look for him. The other is that if he invests his life in the church, someone will search for him.

"Most of the time we will go about our lives, making our ways in a competitive, noisy and exhilarating city. But when the day of need comes, the Christians I am coming to know by name will light a lamp and search for me. And I will do the same for them," Ehrich writes.

In 1989, an earthquake almost flattened Armenia, killing over thirty thousand people in less than four minutes. In the midst of the devastation and chaos, a father left his wife securely at home and rushed to the school where his son was. The school building was in shambles.

Tears filled his eyes as he looked at the debris. He knew he had to try to find his son, though. Years earlier, he had promised his son, "No matter what, I'll always be there for you." He went to the portion of the building where he believed his son to be and started digging. Many came and tried to pull him away, thinking his efforts were in vain. He refused to listen or let them distract him.

After over a day of digging, he pulled back a boulder and heard his son's voice. He screamed his son's name, "Armand!" He heard a voice in the rubble say, "Dad, it's me. I told the other kids not to worry. If you were alive you would save me and when you saved me you would save them. Dad, I knew you would come!" That day, fourteen hungry, thirsty, scared kids were saved all because of the valiant efforts of a loving father.

Isn't this the task of the church? I think so. I believe Rabbi Harold Kushner does, too. When asked recently what the purpose of religion is, he replied, "The purpose of religion is to build community."

Isn't that one message of these parables? I think so and want to do my part to build this kind of faith community at Smoke Rise. I believe you do, too. Let's ask God to help us.