

Scripture reference: Luke 15:1-10

A woman and her grandmother were sitting on their porch discussing a member of the family who had been making some poor decisions. You might say he had “strayed” a bit. The young woman looked at her grandmother and said, “He’s just no good! He’s completely untrustworthy, and just plain lazy!” As she was casually rocking back and forth in her rocker, the grandmother casually replied, “Yes, he’s bad, but Jesus loves him.”

The young woman was not as optimistic as her grandmother and stated, “I’m not so sure of that...” “Oh, yes,” she assured her. “Jesus loves him.” She rocked and thought for a minute or two and then added, “Of course, Jesus doesn’t know him like we do...”

Do you ever feel that way about yourself? Sometimes we can just be very foolish and make poor choices. And then somebody comes and tells us that it will be okay; that no matter what the situation, no matter what poor choices we have made, “God loves us.” I don’t know about you, but sometimes, when I have heard those “reassuring” words, I think, “Well if he loves me, then He must not know me very well...”

I have some good news for you. He knows you well. In spite of the fact that we can be very foolish people, He really does love us! No matter who you are, or what you have done - or even how long you have done it - He loves you. And he will gladly forgive you and accept you. All He asks in return is that you come home to him.

That is what today’s scripture reading is all about. We see this in the first two verses: “Dishonest tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus’ sermons; but this caused complaints from the Jewish religious leaders and the experts on Jewish law because he was associating with such despicable people—even eating with them!” (Luke 15:1-2). You know what this means? Jesus got in trouble with the Pharisees, who were the spiritual leaders at this time, because he hung around sinful people. So Jesus told these two stories we heard today, the story of the lost sheep and the story of the lost coin. He told these stories to the Pharisees as a way of telling them that He hung around with sinful people because God loved them and God wanted them to come **home**. We hear this again a bit further in the gospel of Luke when we read: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” (Luke 19:10)

In the stories we read today, Jesus shows us who God is and how He feels about lost people. In the first story, we are the sheep and God is the Shepherd. In the second story, we are the coin and God is the widow. By looking at these stories we find proof of God’s love for us - in spite of all our foolish ways...

First of all, God values each one of us. The way God values you can be seen in the story of the lost sheep. You are the sheep in this story. We’ve heard that before haven’t we? We are like sheep and God is our shepherd. But when you stop and think about it, and picture it, what’s so great about being a sheep? An animal relegated to hillside grazing and sleeping in an open field or in a barn... probably a little dirty... Maybe not so appealing being a sheep... But consider the time Jesus told this story. In the ancient world, a shepherd’s sheep were his life! Every single sheep was prized and precious. With this in mind, God is saying to you, “You are prized; you are precious.” You are the most important thing in His life!

Okay, I’m good with being a sheep; but what about a lost coin? You know where lost coins have been don’t you? Under the refrigerator for who knows how long, stuck behind the couch cushions along with popcorn, melted chocolate, missing pencils, and who knows what else... It’s just a small coin lady, get over it, it’s not worth it! Or is it? This widow only had ten coins, and each one of them was worth about a day’s wages. Each

one of those ten coins was treasured! Losing one coin, one day's wages, that was a lot! And that's the point of this story. Jesus was conveying that fact that God treasures each and every one of us; we are valuable to Him.

There's another story about "one" that is lost that was not in today's reading. Actually, this story is told in the next few verses following today's reading, and that is the story of the lost son. In this story a son comes to his father and says, "Dad, go ahead and give me my portion of the inheritance now, okay?" What he's really saying is "Dad, I can't wait until you are gone to get my share of your money, give it to me now." You know, if one of my kids came up to me with such a request, I would not only not give it to them at the time, I would be tempted to be sure they never got it! But the father in this story didn't do that. He didn't tell his son to "forget it" now or later, he went ahead and gave his son his portion of what the children would one day inherit. As soon as he got the money, this loving son left home and began to live it up - he went out, a LOT, spent money on women, gambling, and partying. He was just wasting that money; and you know what his father did? He let him! **And then**

I think Jesus was trying to tell the disciples that because God loves us, He will let us go our own way, do what it is that we think we need to do - even if it is wrong. God respects the fact that we have free will and He will not force His own will upon us. And Jesus was also telling us that doing what we think we need to do - even if it is wrong, will not make God turn away from us. He will be there when we are ready...

In this story we are being compared to a son whom a father had lost. People know how important children are, but the importance of a child to a parent is beyond my ability to explain - it's just "more" children are more important to their parents than they are to any one else... Your kids preciousness has immeasurable value - it is beyond value! Imagine how painful it would be to lose one of them - some of you know this pain from your own experiences, so you get it. You know what Jesus is saying here and you understand the magnitude of this statement - "You are as precious to God as a child is to his father. "

When something is lost, it has more value doesn't it? Sheep are always important to a shepherd, but when one is lost, its value seems to be much greater. Money is always important, especially to someone on a fixed income, but when a significant portion of that goes missing, it is really missed! And your children are precious to you every single day, but imagine if you can, how your love for them would become almost a crushing weight if one of them were lost...

We hear stories about missing children on a regular basis. Each time I hear one of those stories or read it in the paper or see it on Facebook, my heart skips a beat and I can feel a lump in my throat and my eyes fill up sometimes spilling out a little bit. I used to be able to only imagine what the parents must be going through. Then in the Spring of 2015 one of our own children went missing. We had a rather strained relationship with her at the time and at 19 years old some people stated she was an adult and she had made her opinion of the family very clear, we should just let it go, not worry about it. One of those "she made her bed, and she can lie in it" kind of things... But we couldn't do that. It didn't matter what our relationship was at the time, or what she thought of us - she was our child! I can't even begin to hope to describe that feeling to any of you. That lump in my throat stayed for weeks - my eyes leaked on a daily basis, and I got angry and sad and scared, ... Our other children didn't get as much of us as they might have wanted; we didn't offer them as much of ourselves as we might otherwise have done. We didn't love them any less, but our focus was on our missing child. The day we got the call telling us that she was found and she was safe... There are no words to describe that sense of relief, that sense of release...

As I was typing this part of my own story, I suddenly truly understood what these parables Jesus told were all about. I truly understood what He was trying to teach... I thought I got it before that I would be able to stand up

here and tell you all how precious you are, how He loves you no matter what, and it would all sound good and it would be true and maybe I would be able to help somebody who was questioning, was wondering if God really loved them, maybe I could help them to believe... But when I was typing my own story and reliving those feelings when we didn't know where our daughter was or if she was safe... NOW I get it!

I once heard about a woman who was asked which of her children she loved the most. And this is how that conversation went:

"Which of your children do you love the most?"

"I love all of my children the same."

"Really? You love all of your children the same?"

"Yes, that's right," "I love all of them the same."

"Come off it, now! It is psychologically impossible for anyone to regard any number of human beings exactly the same. I need you to be straight with me."

"All right, I do not love all of my children exactly the same. When one of them is sick, I love that child more. When one of them is lost, I love that child more. When one of my children is confused or in pain, I love that child more. And when one of them is bad - and I don't mean naughty, I mean really bad - I love that child more." Then she added, "Except for those exceptions I do love all of my children the same."

In Luke 15, Jesus introduces us to a God who is a parent; to a God who is a Father who loves all of his children the same, with His whole heart, just like the woman in that conversation. The stories that Jesus told of the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost son make it clear to us that when we are away from Him, when we are lost - whatever "lost" might look like for each of us - God loves us even more.

We are God's children. God said "Let the children come to me". (Matthew 19:14). And He didn't say, "but only when they are making good choices and being kind and being faithful to living in my image..." He said "Let the children come to me" and He meant ALL the children...

Jesus came to us, himself a child of God, to teach us of this great love that God has for each of us. Let us now, as we begin this season of Sunday School, be like the child Jesus, strong and kind in our teachings of God's great love for all of us. AMEN