

**Series:** Parables from the Master Story Teller  
**Sermon:** "Who Cares about Sinners?"  
**Scripture:** Luke 15:1-24  
**Speaker:** Pastor Phil Thengvall  
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Have you lost something recently, a wallet, a purse, a set of keys, a book, an important document (like the title on your car), or a pet? You have checked all the obvious places, and still can't find it? At this point you might wonder if there is anything else you can do besides giving up. Fortunately there is! Here are six tips for finding lost things, provided by C.S. Larson.

1. *Relax*, your anxiety creates conflict.
2. *Express* your desire to find the lost item.
3. *Relax* some more, breath out all your worries.
4. *Feel* your love for what you have lost.
5. *Let go of* any lingering worry or fear, resume normal activities.
6. *Anticipate* the surprise reunion, when you least expect it you will find what you have lost. The appreciation and gratitude you feel will help bring more lost things home to you.

Remember, however, not all lost things are meant to be found. Sometimes their time with you has passed...don't worry. If what you are looking for is meant to be found again, it will show up.

Now there, don't you feel better already?

What if the lost thing is a body. A friend sent me a copy of the following story....

#### The Italian Tomato Garden

An old Italian man lived alone in the country. He wanted to dig his tomato garden, but it was very difficult work as the ground was hard. His only son, Vincent, who used to help him, was in prison. The old man wrote a letter to his son and described his predicament.

Dear Vincent,

I am feeling pretty bad because it looks like I won't be able to plant my tomato garden this year. I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. If you were here my troubles would be over. I know you would dig the plot for me.

Love Dad

A few days later he received a letter from his son.

Dear Dad,

Not for nothing, but don't dig up that garden. That's where I buried the BODIES.

Love Vinnie

At 4 a.m. the next morning, FBI agents and local police arrived and dug up the entire area without finding any bodies. They apologized to the old man and left.

That same day the old man received another letter from his son.

Dear Dad,

Go ahead and plant the tomatoes now. That's the best I could do under the circumstances.

Love Vinnie

You may be wondering if I am lost! Actually, our text today is all about lost things, and especially about lost people. Have you ever been lost, I mean really lost, wondering if you would ever be able to find your way back home? I got lost in downtown San Francisco at rush hour when I was 12 years old. I can still remember the cold chill of fear that almost paralyzed me. Do you care that I was lost?

But there is a worse way to be lost than in San Francisco. The Bible says that everyone is lost spiritually until they place their faith alone in Jesus Christ as Savior. Who cares about lost people? Who cares about sinners? God does! Do we, do I, do you?

The fact that God loves lost people, sinners, is seen over and over again in the Bible, but let's look at a classic passage which includes three parables that tell us how much God cares for lost people.

The setting in which these stories were told is introduced in the text. I will begin reading with verse 1 of Luke 15.

**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 welcomes sinners and eats with them.”**

Why did Jesus tell these parables in the hearing of the Pharisees?

- To teach God's loving concern for all people, especially sinners. This group constitutes the largest target of the Christian mission.
- To show that the most lost people are those who do not care about those who are spiritually lost (the Pharisees of Jesus' day).
- To teach the correct response when what is lost has been found. The fact that sinners were being found by God was to be a reason to celebrate, not a cause for grumbling.

The attitude of the Pharisees toward sinners could not have been more different than that of Jesus. They had a saying, “There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world.”

In contrast Jesus said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 15:24), and “the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.” (Luke 19:10)

These “lost sinners” found in Jesus one who did not despise and reject them. What did it mean that Jesus “welcomed” sinners? It meant he received them into companionship, he gave them access to his heart.

The first story begins in verse 3.

### **The Parable of the Lost Sheep**

**Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’**

At the end of a day of grazing his sheep in the open country the shepherd would count the sheep as they entered the fold, to see if any were missing. The fold was portable so it could be carried and then put up each evening. As the shepherd counted the sheep one was missing.

#### **The Plight of the lost sheep:**

How did the sheep get lost? It’s what they do. It is the nature of sheep to wander. They do not mean to. They just drift away without realizing it. It is not without reason the prophet Isaiah said, “All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned each one to his own way....”

When our boys were young there was a large, friendly dog who followed us home one day, and he decided to stay. After a few days we knew why the dog didn’t have a home of his own. He had no manners, no training, and didn’t seem all that eager to learn.. So to avoid having to take it to the Humane Society, we decided to let him wander back to where he came from. But he wasn’t prone to wander.

We left the gate open, we would leave for the whole day, but to our dismay, he would be there wagging his tail with joy when we returned. *Too bad he wasn’t a sheep dog.*

The sheep in our story was happily grazing his day away with the flock. He saw some fine grass a few paces away that interested him, so he went to it. Then he saw some more lush patches a few more feet away, and pursued that, and before he realized it, he was alone, the flock was nowhere in sight. He began to bleat and run around, but did not know where to go, so he ran in circles. A sheep in this condition is utterly helpless. Any wild animal, any enemy, can take him easily.

Are you like the lost sheep in the story? You did not intentionally wander away from God. You did not purpose to get into something dangerous and destructive. But little by little, concentrating on the moment and your pursuit of small pleasures, you wandered away. One day you realized you were lost, helpless, and hopeless, without anything truly satisfying in your life.

Or maybe you suffer from what is called “destination sickness”. This sickness is experienced by people who already have all they set out to get in life. They have all they want, but they discover they do not want anything they have. Their life has become empty. They did not plan to be at this point in life, but find that they are, and do not know how it happened, or what to do.

There is good news, as we look at the **Pursuit by the Shepherd**. The shepherd in the story takes the plight of the lost sheep seriously. Now maybe you are thinking, one out of one hundred, not bad after a day in the pasture. 99% are in the fold, safe and sound. Why is one so important? But the shepherd in the story cared as much for the one lost lamb as he did for the 99 that were safe in the enclosure. Look again at what Jesus says in verse 3.

**“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?”**

The shepherd goes after the sheep no matter how long it takes, no matter what it costs, no matter which sheep it is.

Francis Thompson spoke of God as the Hound of Heaven, who pursued him until he found him.

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
And shot, precipitated,  
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,  
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

The shepherd's footfall is always there. He will not give us up. He finds us when we are lost, when we are trapped, when we wait for death to claim us.

What does the shepherd do when he finds the lost sheep? He carries it home and then invites everyone to a Party for the Lost Sheep. In verse 5 it says,

**And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’**

The first thing we notice is that the sheep gets carried home, not led by a rope and scolded with words of blame and shame. He senses the care of the shepherd as he is gently and safely placed on his strong shoulders for the journey home.

But this is not a private celebration. Everyone is invited to celebrate the recovery of the lost sheep. What a nice story, with a happy ending too. Maybe this is what the Pharisees were thinking until Jesus said,

**“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”**

The Pharisees were unaware as they grumbled and complained about all those “sinners” coming to Jesus, that heaven was hosting parties for each lost lamb that was found.

Jesus by the use of a parable calls his critics to change their attitude about the sinners who are listening to the story of life, and responding. This parable underlines the supreme

value God places on lost men and women, lost boys and girls. God cares about each one, God cares about you. Jesus, the good Shepherd considers no trouble, sacrifice, or suffering too great a cost to pay to find the lost sheep and bring it back

But, just in case there were a few dense Pharisees, ones that could not relate to a lost sheep tale, Jesus told a second story, one about a lost coin.

### **Parable of the Lost Coin**

**“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”**

In this story the odds increase, as the loss represents 10% of the total value, instead of just 1% of the total. As you can see the story has many similarities, a lost item, a search, and celebration upon recovery. However the description of the search is more detailed in this story.

### **The Plight of the Lost Coin**

The coin which was lost was not of great monetary value, maybe only worth a quarter in our currency, but it was equivalent to a day’s wage for a common laborer. Why then the panic? Why the trauma? In Jesus’ day married women wore a frontlet on their forehead, called a semedi (see picture) containing ten silver coins that signified their marriage covenant. It would be similar to a wedding ring, or an engagement ring in our culture. It may have represented her dowry. It told other men she was unavailable. By law this headdress was protected and could not be taken from her to pay a debt. If she were to be divorced, these coins would keep her from being penniless. What did it mean if a coin was missing? If a woman had been unfaithful to her husband a coin was sometimes removed from her semedi to tell everyone who saw her she was an adulteress.

The missing coin meant she was incomplete. It implied carelessness, if not infidelity. She must find it to avoid public humiliation.

This coin was lost at home, a place of apparent safety, where you would not expect things to be lost. Especially not in a small home the kind this poor woman would reside in, probably a one or two room residence.

I hesitate to press this point too much, but people cannot only be lost when they wander away from the flock, they can be lost at home, in a godly family, in the church, surrounded by caring Christian people. They can be deceived into thinking they are Christians because they give mental assent to what the Bible says, and practice trusting God for temporal things. But these people have never placed their faith alone in Christ for their eternal salvation, and are just as lost as the person who never darkens the door of a church. Like the coin, they are very hard to “find” since they do not know they are lost. They have assumed the Christian way of life, like putting clothes on, so everyone else assumes their salvation too. However, eternal life is not gained by osmosis, nor can salvation rub-off on someone who hangs with the Christians.

### **Pursuit by the Woman**

Now that we understand the value of this one coin we can also understand the intensity and thoroughness of the search that ensued. To find the coin that was lost, the woman first lit a lamp, then swept the house, and finally searched diligently. Houses in that day did not have any windows, so a lamp was imperative. Floors were not carpeted, but were made of packed dirt covered with straw. To find the small coin all the straw and debris must be cleared out so the dirt could be searched. If a woman will go to that extreme effort to restore a lost coin, what will God do to restore a lost person? Everything!

The point of the parable is: how much more than a coin, God loves and searches for you and me. Neither the flock nor the frontlet were complete without the recovery of the lost sheep and lost coin. The caring love and personalized concern of God is clearly seen in these parables. *Who cares about sinners? God does!*

### **Party for the recovered coin**

The twin stories end on the same note: **And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’**

Like the shepherd, for the woman this is not a private celebration, but a neighborhood night on the town, a block party. She too called her friends and neighbors and invited them to rejoice with her.

Jesus added a similar comment, especially for the Pharisees who had the wrong attitude about the lost. If the angels are doing high-fives in heaven, what should God’s children on earth be doing when lost men and women, lost boys and girls are found? Do we celebrate? Do we even acknowledge a new life in Christ? How should we respond? More about this later. We have one more story.

### **Parable of the Lost Son**

Since this is such a well-known parable, we will not take much time to introduce it, other than to say it is the third story in a row about something that is lost, sought for, and found. The stakes increase with each story; this lost item is one of two, instead of one of ten, or one of one hundred. Also, the one lost is a person, not an animal or an object. Another difference is that while the first two stories focused on the seeking love of God, in this story Jesus sheds a clear light on the human side of repentance. While we did not know the thoughts of the sheep, we will get an in-depth look at the thoughts and feelings of the lost son. I will begin in verse 11.

**Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.**

In Jesus’ day a father could either distribute his wealth to his sons by means of a will that would be enacted at his death, or could sometimes begin to distribute his estate while still living in the form of presents. It was rare that a father would actually allot the inheritance before his death, but as in this story it did happen occasionally. To request it

prematurely was the same as expressing a wish that the father would die. In his commentary on Luke, Mark Bailey said

" . . . to my knowledge, in all of Middle Eastern literature (aside from this parable) from ancient times to the present, there is no case of any son, older or younger, asking for his inheritance from a father who is still in good health."

The father's willingness to accommodate his younger son's request shows that he was gracious and generous. The story continues,

**“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.**

### **The Plight of the Lost Son**

Evidently the son turned his assets into cash and then departed to have fun. He may have wanted to "find himself," but he ended up losing himself.

Here is an example of someone who is lost because of self-will, because of rebellion. When we think of lost people, this may be the kind we hear about most often. Franklin Graham, son of evangelist Billy Graham, wrote his own story of rebellion in a book entitled, Rebel With a Cause. Maybe you can best identify with this story, maybe you are still lost in the far country, spiritually speaking.

Feeding pigs was, of course, unclean work for anyone, but especially for a Jew. It was a job that any self-respecting Jew would only do out of total desperation. The son was willing to do this because his need had become so great. The pigs and the son evidently ate the seeds of carob trees. He had sunk so low that no one showed him any compassion. Jesus knew the Pharisees would have recognized this young man as representing the very sinners they despised, the ones whom Jesus loved and accepted.

### **The Pursuit by the Father**

There is a major difference in this story from the previous stories, in that we do not have indications that the father did anything to find his rebellious son. But to assume he didn't care would be highly insensitive, and not in keeping with his actions when his son returned. No doubt he had kept tabs on him since he had left home, and was aware of the downward spiral his journey had taken. Every bit of gossip was like a knife wound in the father's heart, but he never fully gave up looking for him. Each day that passed without his return only deepened the ache in his heart. I believe the reason the son's heart and thoughts turned toward home and his father was because his father longed for him to return. Remember this is a story that is portraying the love of God, the Heavenly Father, for lost sinners. I quoted earlier from the poem, the hound of heaven. Here are the last lines,

Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest  
I am him whom thou seekest!

Before we come to Christ, all of our longing, restlessness and discontent is because the heart of God is searching for us. If we stop hiding, stop running in circles, stop looking elsewhere, we will find him finding us.

George Chadwick put these thoughts to song, when he wrote,

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew  
 He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;  
 It was not I that found, O Savior true;  
 No, I was found of Thee.

All of the son's emptiness, misery, and despair was because of the searching, loving heart of his father. If God wasn't searching for lost sinners, they would not be aware of their lostness. What turned the son's thoughts to his father were his father's thoughts of him. Eventually the son realized what he needed to do.

The most hope-filled phrase in this story is in verse 17, "When he came to his senses". An older translation puts it this way; "But when he came to himself." The story is told of a very eloquent black preacher speaking on this parable. He was illustrating what happened to the prodigal son in the far country. He said, "As his money disappeared he had to sell his clothes in order to eat. He took off his shoes and sold those. Then he took off his coat and sold that. Then he took off his shirt and sold that. And then he came to himself!"

Jesus tells it this way....

**“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father.**

When he came to his senses the young man realized four things: 1) he had lost everything, even his freedom; 2) all the things he had lost he had gotten from his father; 3) all that he now wanted and needed was to be found in his father's house; and 4) he had no more claim on his father, he had given up his sonship.

But maybe he could return to his father and be hired on as a common servant. Earlier he had demanded his rights in self-sufficient pride (“give me my share”) Now he is quite willing, in his humility, to take the very lowest place (“make me like one of your hired men”), and to obey his father's commands. So he arose and went to his father.

### **The Party for the Lost Son**

In all his wildest dreams he could not have predicted the surprising reception that awaited him at his father's house. His father's heart had continued to remain faithful in his love for his rebellious son. His grief over his son's departure was intense. He had never ceased to watch and wait for his son to return from the “far country”. We pick up the story in the middle of verse 20:

**“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.**

**“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’”**

I am sure the son’s confession was much more heart felt, his shame much deeper, his feeling of unworthiness much greater at this unexpected welcome home. His repentance was genuine, his remorse and sorrow were real. But it appears the father didn’t even hear his confession of guilt. He did not address a single word to his wayward and rebellious son. Instead he showered him with hugs and kisses.

The father did not speak to his son directly, but spoke about his son to his servants.

**“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”**

This welcome party is loaded with symbolism, we need to unpack it.

- *The Father ran* – considered undignified, scandalous, for a gentleman to act in this fashion.
- *Hugs and Kisses* – this also breaks with all Middle Eastern protocol. No self-respecting father would greet his rebellious son in this manner. That is the point, God is no regular father. The father in the story literally drapes himself around his son’s neck, continually kissing him.
- *The Best Robe* – he covers the rags of his rebellion with a robe that signifies acceptance and honor.
- *Ring* – the symbol of sonship and authority. The one with the ring could speak for the father, and had access to all that belonged to the father.
- *Sandals on his feet* – only the servants went barefooted, a son wore shoes, a sign of his honored position in the father’s house.
- *The Fattened Calf* – a grain-fed calf, the one kept for festive occasions, when important company came to visit.
- *Son was dead/alive, was lost/found* – he had willfully determined to leave the father permanently, so was dead and lost to the father. He had been found and was alive.

This story was very bothersome to the Pharisees. They would have liked a different ending, like this one found in ancient literature.

"There is a Buddhist story that provides a fascinating contrast to the Lord's story. It also tells of a son who left home and returned years later in rags and misery. His condition was so severe that he did not recognize his own father. But his father recognized him and told the servants to take him into the mansion and to clean him up. Over time the son became dutiful, considerate, and moral. Satisfied, the father finally revealed his identity and formally accepted his son as his heir."

Which story do you like better? I wonder, do you care about sinners?

Is your attitude toward those who are lost in a spiritual sense more like the attitude of God or more like the attitude of the Pharisees?

The Pharisees would have understood and approved of the Buddhist story. It appeals to my sense of justice as well. It is reasonable to wait for a rebellious son to achieve worthiness before it is granted. But that is not the attitude of the Father our Lord describes. It is not a parable of merits. It is a parable of grace, outrageous grace. “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a *wretch* like me”.

Using the outline, let’s review the lessons of the three parables:

- To teach God’s loving concern for all people, especially sinners. Jesus welcomed them and ate with them. How do you treat those whom you know are not Christians? Do you intentionally befriend them? Have them to your home for a meal? Lovingly share your faith with them?
- To show that the most lost people are those who do not care about those who are spiritually lost. When we become insensitive to lost people who need the Savior, and when we have little else but criticism for the mess people get into - then we are most in need of a loving shepherd to find us and bring us back to himself. Do you really care for the lost, those who will spend eternity in hell if they die before receiving Jesus Christ as savior? Do they know you care?
- To teach the correct response when what is lost has been found. It’s party time, not time to murmur and complain. We’ll soon begin to do this in a more visible fashion on Sunday mornings, so we can celebrate together the finding of lost people.

What are you supposed to do as a result of hearing these parables of the Master Story Teller? I know one thing for sure, take your spiritual temperature. If your heart is apathetic or cold toward lost people, don’t assume you are a Christian. True children of God have God’s concern for the lost. I believe God is saying to each Christian here this morning... “\_\_\_\_\_, if you want me, care for the lost. That’s where you will find me. What you do for and with them, you will do for and with me.”

Or God may be saying, “It is time to stop wandering, stop hiding, stop running away. I love you, come home. I am waiting for you, seeking for you, longing for you my child. Come home.” By praying a simple prayer of confession you can come home to God this morning. I will remain down front after the service and will be available to pray with you. This can be your day to come home to the Father.