

“Tell Me the Story - Found It”
Third in a Series
Celebrate with me, I’ve found my lost sheep!
Luke 15:6 MSG
June 30, 2019
Pastor Jenothy Irvine

Prayer - Dear Jesus, speak to us once more of God’s unlimited and unfailing love.

Message

It was early spring and a wet, heavy snow was falling. I spent the night with my best friend out on her parent’s ranch, five miles from town. Staying with her always meant early morning feedings for the animals and egg gathering duty. In the winter and spring, it also meant calf checking. I’ve never understood why, but in Wyoming calving season runs the middle of winter and into spring.

We had done the feedings and egg collecting and it was time to go check on the calves and their mommas. Everyone in the barns were doing fine - warm and dry. Then it was time to ride horses to the back pasture and check the cows there. Some of them were soon to be mammas and they always tried to keep an eye on them and move them to the barn for the birthing.

We bundled up, saddled the horses, who were not super thrilled to be going out in the spring snow, and rode down the two-track road toward the back field.

It was incredible - beautiful huge flakes, fell as if in slow motion and we became part of the silence around us. The river to our right and the red / brown hills to our left. The sound of the horses breathing, their hooves pushing snow and the sound of the leather saddle / bridle moving in time with their bodies.

It remains one of the most memorable rides I have had in my life. But it wasn’t because of the snow and silence. It was because of what happened next.

By the time we made the mile ride, the snow was coming in a little faster and harder. We got to the cows and for the most part they had gathered up near the corner of the fence where a couple trees provided some shelter and their body heat kept each other warm.

Then we saw her. Number 257 - one of the soon to be mamma cows out in the middle of the pasture all alone. She was facing away from the other cows as if looking across the field. She bellowed a couple times but never turned around.

As we approached we soon discovered why. She had given birth out in the pasture! I held Anita's horse while she dismounted and checked the cow, making sure she was o.k. She was fine, but there was no calf. It appeared she had been trying to get to the other cows but the calf couldn't make it, or she had to leave it. We weren't sure.

About that time, Rick, Anita's dad, came riding through the snow. He saw the snow getting heavier and faster and wanted to make sure we were o.k. He obviously saw what we saw and now the search was on for the baby calf. I don't know how big this particular pasture was but they own 600+ acres and this was one of the larger fields along the river.

We led the horses in a wide circle around the mamma. No calf. We headed out in the direction momma was facing, and rode the fence line. No calf. Rick rode up through the herd huddled by the trees. No calf. We came back and much like a search and rescue team does, we rode 3 across in a straight line and started going back and forth across the field. No calf.

I don't see a lot of cattle ranches in Indiana but I have come to know and care about some corn, soybean, and winter wheat farmers who if they lose a crop, they lose a lot more than just a crop. Even one field lost can be a big loss. So it was for Anita and her family. One calf lost, even though they ran hundreds of cattle, was still a big loss.

I don't know how long we looked, but it was long enough that the storm settled in good, the wind picked up, and visibility was bad. Not to mention my hands, feet, face, and the tops of my legs were wet and cold. The horses kept trying to turn their heads toward the barn.

We made another pass through the field and I had to skirt a drainage ditch area. That's when I heard a noise - the faintest little cry for help you can imagine. I rode up to the lip of drainage area and there he was. A little black dot against the falling snow. I hollered, "I found it! I found it!" And forgot all about being cold and wet.

Rick jumped off his horse, slid down the bank, scooped up that calf, opened up his coat, tucked him in against his chest and clammored back up to his horse. I still don't know how he hung on to the calf, grabbed the reins and slung himself back up on his horse but he did and we were off.

We went back to the mamma and Rick let her sniff and nuzzle her baby inside his coat and she knew to follow us back up to the barn, which is exactly what she did - bellowing, mooing and telling anyone who would listen, two legged or four, that her baby was found. Even before we got to the barn the other mammas and babies were joining her celebration.

And I must admit, all three of the humans were smiling, laughing, and cooing over that silly calf. Even Anita's mom came down to the barn with blankets out of the dryer and a bottle of warm milk for the baby.

If I can feel that way about a cow, I can only imagine how God must feel about finding one of us!

That is what our message is about today. About God yelling out, "found it" and the joy it brings when one of God's lost are found. Today's parables tell of the very nature of God and the love found there.

Hear again how incredible God's love is and how we need to join the celebration rather than squelch to Spirit. Read Text: Luke 15:1-10

It has been called, "the gospel in the gospel" and contains the very essence of the "good news which Jesus came to tell" (199). Commentator and bible scholar William Barclay declares that "there is no chapter of the New Testament so well known and so dearly loved as the fifteenth chapter of Luke" (199).

Here Jesus gathers once again with "tax collectors and sinners" (vs. 1). In other words the politically corrupt, those who take advantage of others and abuse their power for personal and financial gain and get away with it, and any number of persons labeled as a problem. Today it would be the scam artists, corrupt politicians and government leaders around the world, who step on their people or bully their people to get ahead or to stay in power. It would also include people from any number of minority or shunned groups of our society - drug addicts, mentally ill, the homeless, the ones living off the system, refugees, those in jail or prison, blacks, hispanics, latinos, lgbtq, delinquent teenagers, and on and on our labels go.

That's one group gathering to hear what Jesus has to say. Also there, following I am sure at a safe distance, as to not be associated or contaminated, are the pharisees and scribes. These are the educated and religious men; the holy and anointed ones according to Jewish custom and tradition. These are the folks who are known as the keepers of the law or doctors of the law and they stem from a time in Jewish history when old testament law became the focus of Jewish belief (Interpreters Dictionary 246).

It was an offence to the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus associated with these men and women who, by their Jewish definition and understanding, were labelled as sinners. In fact, the Pharisees gave to people who did not keep the law a general classification. They were called "the people of the land" and there was a complete barrier between the pharisees and them (Barclay 199). So extreme was this barrier that to marry a daughter to one of the them was like exposing her

“bound and helpless to a lion”. (Barclay). There was to be no trust given to them, no testimony heard, no secrets shared, no status given, no deals made, and no association with these horrible people. They were to be avoided at all cost (Barclay 199). Why? Because they did not live by the rules established by the self appointed religious leaders of the day OR they did not fit the mold of what was deemed normal and acceptable.

So engrained was this barrier that one commentator said, “when seeking to understand these parables of Jesus you will understand [them] more fully if you remember that the strict Jews said, not ‘there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents,’ but rather, ‘there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God” (Barclay 200).

Wow, harsh right? But is it any worse than what we do today? Oh we use more sophisticated language or convoluted policy, and we sugar coat the issues (sometimes) or worse ignore them all together, yet the results are the same. The barriers still exist. The division stands strong.

The thing that bothered the Pharisees and the scribes then is the same thing that bothers many believers today. The same questions they asked are the ones many believers ask today. What in the world are you thinking God? Jesus, what do you see in that person? What good are they? Don’t you know who / what they are or what they have done and the kind of background they have? How could you possibly care about such a person?

I think every generation claims the phrase “now more than ever,” but now more than ever, church, we need to hear the message of these parables of Jesus. We need to recognize God is a God who keeps looking, searching, seeking, and pursuing until all are found. We need to realize what a big deal it is when God gets to yell out, “found it!” And we need to celebrate with God the great joy that another calf made it to the barn! Another heart was found by Jesus, not because anything was inherently wrong with them but because they are just as loved and just as deserving.

It's time we stop judging how they, them, those got lost in the first place or what took place to land them where they are and whether or not they deserve to be lost. If that was the case, where would you and I be? Maybe we are the lost ones and not them! What if Jesus is trying to tell us that being lost simply means being apart from or separated from community? What if it is not a sin issue but an acceptance issue? What if being lost is about not having a place in society or not being accepted in the culture? Could that be what Jesus is addressing?

We think repentance or being found in this case, is about the sinner, taking action and responsibility for their life - and living with the consequences. Jesus however, didn't judge the sheep about the reason for its "lostness" and neither are they called sinful or bad. He didn't inspect the sheep for scrapes where it intentionally crawled through the fence, or broke down the gate. He didn't stare it down expecting to see blatant defiance looking back. In fact the text doesn't tell us the sheep did anything wrong at all, or that it was trying to do or be anything more or less than it was designed to be. Maybe it was pushed out by the other sheep. Maybe it had had enough of the herd and thought it better to stay away. Maybe it was simply trying to figure things out for itself.

Furthermore, in the second story, Jesus didn't put less value on the coin because it was worth less in the eyes of society. All this to say, being found is not solely the work or action taken by those who are "lost." Knowing we are lost in any capacity only becomes possible as a result of being found by God. It is when we are found we come to understand how lost we were. Thus it is truly a divine gift. (homileticonline.com Luke 15:1-10 Sept. 17, 1995).

It is a gift not to be hindered, limited, blocked, or bound by what those who think they know better, determine is acceptable, comfortable, worthy, wanted, or safe. It is a gift unconditionally given by God for the love of God's creation and a desire to see every sheep make it home and every lost coin found. God is the shepherd in the first parable. God is the woman in the second parable. God the good shepherd won't stop looking and God the woman won't stop searching.

What does that tell you about God? What does that say about how loved all people are?

What the Pharisees and scribes failed to see and treasure was the gift itself. The gift that had already been freely given to them. The gift that was standing right in front of them, if they could but look away from themselves and not be so afraid of what they didn't know or what they couldn't explain. A gift that was bigger, deeper, and wider than their precious law. Not that law and tradition didn't have its place, just as it does today, but they failed, like so many believers do today, to see the gift that Jesus was illustrating with these two parables was the very gift of God's love, which is greater than any law.

Why would any of us who have experienced God's incredible and magnificent love want to keep that from anyone else? Why would any of us who have felt God's mercy and grace want to stand in the way of such a gift for anyone else? Jesus is waiting for your answer. AMEN