

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost; October 2, 2022

+ Luke 15:1-10 +

“Search How Jesus Searches”

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. But the Pharisees and experts in the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eat with them.”

He told them this parable: “Which one of you, if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls together his friends and neighbors, telling them, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!’ I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.

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

What is the most valuable thing you have ever lost? Have you ever reached for your back pocket and found a flat pocket where your wallet should be, or reached around the back of your chair for your purse and found...air? When you do, you stop everything else and start looking for it. And you keep looking until you find it. Because it's not just the money in there; it's the credit cards and the license and everything else you'll have to deal with if you can't find it. What about a document you were working on at your computer? Have you ever ignored the sage advice to “save your work often,” only to have a death screen pop up out of nowhere? Once your computer restarts (if it does), you try everything to get your work back. And we'll not even get into the topic of losing a child at the grocery store or the amusement park, because I may experience a traumatic flashback and start to cry. Suffice it to say you will never search harder for anything than a lost child, or a lost parent.

When something important is lost, you search. And how hard you search will depend on how valuable that thing is to you. The more valuable the thing, the more diligent and urgent the search is when that thing is lost.

When the Pharisees see the kind of the people Jesus is spending time with, they see human beings without value. The Pharisees see in Jesus' company nothing but thieving tax collectors and other miserable sinners who did not deserve the time of day from a respected rabbi. They do not respect the people gathering around Jesus, and so they do not respect him, either.

But when Jesus looks these sinners gathering around him, he sees the most precious thing. He sees the thing that is more valuable to God than anything else: human sinners that need his salvation. God does value human beings more than anything else. We see that from word go of the Bible, when God creates the entire universe with just his word – except for human beings. God makes everything perfect, but when it is time to create human beings, he slows down and uses extra special care. He forms human beings,

specially crafting them, and breathes his own breath of life into them. When he does that, God gives human beings a soul and shows that we are the most important part of his creation. We are the only piece of his creation made in God's own image. We possess superior intellect, will, and reason. And up to the fall into sin, we also had the perfect desire to use them in God's service.

God shows how valuable human souls are again when Adam and Eve cave to temptation and fall into sin. When that happens, God could just let his first human beings perish and suffer eternally. But they are so valuable to him that he refuses to let that happen. Instead, he steps in immediately and gives them hope by promising a Savior.

Throughout the Old Testament, God proves again and again and again how precious people are as he repeats that promise of a Savior again and again, gradually revealing more and more about the One he will send. God reveals that his salvation is not just for some people, but for all – that's how valuable people are to him: he wants none of them to die in sin! He wants them all to live with him forever.

When that Savior finally comes, he proves that God is serious about his love for all people. He does exactly what the Father has promised, living a life of complete perfection in the place of every sinful person, and shedding his blood to purify all humanity from the stain and punishment of sin. If that is not proof enough of God's appreciation for all human beings, his Holy Spirit then sends messengers to every nook of the world to proclaim his salvation to every sinful heart.

Yes, God looks at people – all people – and sees something he cherishes: beings he makes and loves so much that he promised, completed, and proclaimed salvation for each and every one.

That was a long way of saying that when Jesus, the Son of God, looks at the tax collectors and other sinners gathering around him, he does not see human refuse to be tossed aside. As God's own Son, he sees precious humans. And more than that, he sees them as precious and lost.

And of course, the more valuable something is, the harder you search when it is lost. Jesus wants the Pharisees to know that these lost souls mean more than the world to him, so he tells the Pharisees two stories. The first is of a lost sheep, sought and found by his shepherd. It is only one sheep, but to a shepherd every sheep is valuable. Protecting his sheep and watching over them is a shepherd's life. His sheep mean everything. A lost human being is even more precious to the Lord than a sheep to a shepherd. A good shepherd stops at nothing to find his sheep. And the Good Shepherd stops at nothing to find a lost soul. The second story is similar, and makes the same point. A woman has lost a coin, worth about a couple hundred dollars in today's terms. She has ten of them total, so she's lost a full ten percent of her liquid assets. It's valuable, and she will look until she finds it.

When we lose something valuable, we look until we find it. That is what Jesus does with lost souls. With patience. With persistence. They are too important for him ever to give up the search. And to teach the Pharisees one last time how truly precious every person is, Jesus finishes each story with a celebration once the lost is found. And he says there is a celebration in heaven, too, when one lost person is found. One last time, it proves how deeply God cares for every soul – when a lost one is found, he throws a heavenly party.

But how exactly does Jesus find the lost? Our Savior finds the lost whenever he turns a heart from unbelief to faith in him. In these stories, Jesus uses the word “repentance.” Repentance happens when a person sees their sin and their need for forgiveness, and turns to Jesus for that forgiveness they need. Every time that happens, a lost soul is found, saved and on its way to heaven. God gets what he loves the most: another person for his kingdom. And heaven rejoices.

In order for someone lost to be found by Christ, they need to hear about him first. That makes sense, of course. A person needs to hear about sin and the love of their Savior, and then the Holy Spirit can work faith in Jesus in their hearts. And that’s where you come in. In the Bible, we see Jesus conducting his search for lost souls personally. He talked to people face to face and told them to repent. He told them in person that they needed his forgiveness. He said with his own mouth, “Trust in me for the forgiveness of sins.”

But Jesus is no longer walking this earth. Long before he ascended, he was already sending out missionaries. And just before he ascended, he entrusted the search to his disciples. He told them to proclaim the Word and baptize to bring people to faith. But his command is not for them only. He conducts his search for the lost through all those already found, like you and me. We are the search party Jesus sends out to find the lost and tell them about our Savior, so that those precious lost souls are found by repenting and trusting in Jesus.

It happens very rarely that a person just picks up a Bible, starts reading, and believes. Most people who are found by Jesus hear his gospel message from of a friend or a relative bringing the message to them. Parents brought them to the font, where the Holy Spirit blessed them with faith. A boyfriend, a roommate, someone close to them talked about sin and grace. We are the search party Jesus has sent out with his message that calls lost souls to him.

It is right for us to thank God for the successes and improvements he has given us in this work. For example, each year this congregation carves out a significant slice of her total budget to pay for mission work around the world, and for future pastors and teachers who will proclaim Jesus’ love. That’s great. Thank God for that success. This congregation’s work to form friendships with our neighbors and bring them into contact with Jesus’ gospel has improved over the past few years. God works all good in us, and we thank him for that improvement. And I’m sure that many of you could share personal successes. You could think of times God gave you the strength and courage to search out the lost by speaking to a friend about Jesus. Thank God for that good work in searching for the lost.

And, on the other hand, we should admit our failures, too. A Christian friend told this story. (He is not a person who generally makes things up or embellishes them.) He had a coworker who became his friend. Based on what this coworker said, he was clearly not a Christian. After two years, the Christian finally spoke to him about the reality of sin, and the saving work of Christ. His friend’s response? “If you really believed that I was going to miss out on heaven without Jesus, you wouldn’t have waited two years to tell me.” Ouch. Then I thought: How many people could have said to me...but they never did, because I never spoke to them about Jesus at all?

Why don’t we show more urgency in finding the lost? Is there some of that Pharisaical spirit in us that thinks some people just aren’t worth the effort?

Each one of us was totally lost, and we still wander, every time we sin. But we are valuable to Christ. He came for us. He died and rose for us. And he searched for us when we were lost. He found us by turning our hearts to him. There was a party in heaven for each one of us.

This is our forgiveness for not searching with the heart of Christ. It is also our reminder: Others are just as valuable as we are, so we strive to search for them with all the eagerness of Christ.

Christ searches eagerly. He also searches patiently. He doesn't give up. Don't give up in your search to lead souls to Christ. Remember: when something is valuable, you search until you find it. Nothing is more valuable than a person Jesus died for.

Christ also searches with care. Take how you approach a person with the message of Christ – not as someone better, but as someone who also was lost and is now found by Christ, as someone who still wanders and needs God's grace to call him back.

Search how your Savior searches. You are so valuable to him that he searched for you and found you, turning your heart to him. And heaven rejoiced. See others the way he does, and search how he searches. And may heaven rejoice again and again and again and again for each one he finds. Amen.