

Sermon 5.3.20

Lost and Found

The Pharisees and Scribes of Jesus' time expected a great religious teacher to speak in learned language and speak of convoluted theology. But Jesus told stories everyone could understand. The Pharisees and Scribes taught that eating and meeting with sinners was unclean and that a good man would avoid them. Jesus ate and met with sinners as often as he could. He said he was sent to minister to the sinners and to save them. And he taught them in parables.

Jesus told parables as a way to teach those who followed him and to teach us today. He used simple stories that gave people heavenly truths. The parables were easily understood by the common people who followed Jesus. They could relate to the stories through their life experiences. The stories were memorable. We have all learned the many stories in the parables since we were young. And most of us could retell a number of them just from memory. Jesus was a gifted teacher.

This morning's gospel that Jamie just read is one of the greatest parables. One of our beautiful stained-glass windows in the sanctuary, chosen by the congregation that built our church, is the story of this parable. Jamie and I see it every week while we deliver the message. For a long time, I thought the window was about the Parable of the Good Shepherd but now I realize it is the Parable of the Lost Sheep. When you look at it you see the verse. "And when he finds the sheep, he lays it on his shoulders...". It is the story of the shepherd who leaves the flock to find the lost one, bring it home and rejoice that it is saved.

Let's take some time This morning to reflect on what Jesus is saying to us today through this parable He taught 2,000 years ago.

Chapter 15 of Luke has been called the "gospel in the gospel". William Barclay says it is "the very distilled essence of the good news which Jesus came to tell." In Chapter 15 we find a series of 3 parables on loss and reunion. The Parable of the Lost Sheep is the first of the 3 parables about the return of something precious. The other 2 are the parable of the Lost Coin and the parable of the Prodigal Son. All three of these stories tell of loss and reuniting. Luke wants us

to know that this theme: loss and reuniting is really central to Jesus' teaching. It is an important aspect of God that Jesus wanted us to understand.

Have you ever lost something or someone? I remember the sense of blind panic I had when our son, Evan, disappeared at the age of 3 in a department store and we could not find him. The sense of terror is one I will never forget. It was all encompassing. I couldn't breathe or think straight or even talk coherently. I just frantically retraced my steps, calling his name, asking for help. Some of you parents may have had a similar experience. It took about 5 minutes to find him. He was playing hide and seek. But to me those 5 minutes seemed an eternity. We found him inside a clothing rack, enjoying the game. The rush of relief and joy in finding him, the tears and the crushing hugs, as if I would never let him go were my reaction to the reunion.

What if that is the way God feels about each of us when we stray from the Way and return?

In the Jewish tradition that Jesus came from, the path to God was righteousness. To be saved you needed to obey the complex Jewish law. You needed to repent of your sins and fully obey every part of the law to be accepted by God. God did not freely give love and grace; you had to earn His acceptance. But that love and grace was exactly what Jesus taught: that God's love and grace came to us when we returned to Him as we repented of our sins. It did not have to be earned by following a set of rules to the letter.

Jesus taught that God loved the sinners. That God longed for them to return to Him. Jesus told us that He was the Good Shepherd that would seek the lost sheep and bring it back into the fold. Luke in chapter 19:10 tells us "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

**Our UCC statement of faith reminds us that:
God creates man in his own image and sets before him the ways of life death
That God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.**

God seeks to save each of us. God is on our side every moment of every day as we journey through this life. God gives us our freedom but he seeks each of us with holy love, He seeks to save us from an aimless and sinful life. He does not

give us our freedom and lets us wander around and if we find our way back ok, if not, too bad. God seeks us. He creates us to love us and for us to love Him.

Let me tell you a story about the power of God's love and grace to save a soul. It is the story of the hymn Amazing Grace that we heard this morning. Amazing grace is one of the best-known Christian hymns. It is estimated that it is performed over 10 million times every year.

Amazing Grace is actually a poem by a man named John Newton that was later set to music. It was written in 1772 and is the story of Newton's personal experience of the loving grace of God and how it changed him completely.

Newton was born in 1725 in a London suburb that was a thriving shipping port. He had a difficult childhood. His father was a sea captain, often away on voyages for years, and his mother died of TB when he was 6. Despite being raised in Christianity, he lacked a deep conviction in his religious beliefs and lead a largely undisciplined life.

After a long series of misadventures brought on by his defiant nature, he was on a ship that sailed into a violent storm that almost sank the vessel, prompting Newton to cry out to God to save them from the storm. This was the beginning of his real spiritual conversion but he had still more trials before he came to God. After surviving the storm, he became the captain of a slave ship for a number of years. Newton finally left the sea trade after he suffered a stroke. This time he finally turned completely to God. As Newton looked at the many disasters and turning points in his life, he could see that they lead to his slow path to God. He became an Anglican priest in 1764 and ultimately became active in the English anti-slavery movement. He lived to see the abolition of slavery in England.

And now we can see how the lyrics of this hymn is the autobiography of Newton, as well as many of us, that have been lost and found by the grace of God:

*I once was lost,
but now am found,
Was blind
but now I see.*

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come.
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

The grace of God's love leading us home to Him.

This story of redemption is not unique. There are literally millions of stories like this. I have heard such stories from recovered alcoholics and people with other addictions; that turning their lives over to a higher power was the beginning of the path back to sobriety and a life of purpose and peace.

This week I really want you to think of the times you have been lost and were found. Of the grace of God that has save you from dangers, toils and snares. Of the love of the Father that calls us home to Him as He waits lovingly for us to return.

The stories of each of our lives are filled with the love of God working in us and around us. God is calling you and I to be the people He created us to be. His love and grace are truly amazing. We each have our own story of Amazing Grace.