

## Holy Curiosity: God's Love for Sinners

May 22, 2022

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

### Luke 15:1-7

For the last month or so we have been diving headlong into some really fun, challenging, and unusual passages of scripture in our sermon series titled "Holy Curiosity," where we have been exploring themes and topics that have been requested by you, as members of the congregation. In some cases, some of you have simply raised general questions that we have taken a look at through the lens of scripture, and others of you have posed to me a particular scripture passage and have said "I want to explore *this*." And in every case, we have all been stretched together to learn something new, or to think about something from a new or different angle; to wrestle with hard topics and to deepen our life of faith.

Today feels to me a little bit like taking a deep breath and resting for a few minutes in a passage of scripture that is a lot more familiar to us. It is a lovely scripture. A comforting scripture. Although, it is a passage of scripture that I think, unfortunately, has become so well-known that we forget just how scandalous or off-putting it would have been to the very first hearers.

The parable of the lost sheep is the first in a set of three parables that only show up in the gospel of Luke. And these three parables – these stories told by Jesus – are really interesting in the *way* that they show up.

Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus very often telling one story after another, after another, every one of which is intended to drive home a particular point. To help people understand – using language and images that they would be familiar with – the beauty and complexity of the kingdom of God. And in truth, the kingdom of God is so beautiful and so big and so complex and so counter-cultural that there is no way we could even begin to fathom the first thing about it without these stories that make it real to us.

But usually, when Jesus is preaching and storytelling, he will tell one story that illustrates one point, and then maybe take a little rest; maybe explain his story a bit (or not, depending on his mood at the moment); maybe de-brief with his disciples; maybe let the religious leaders stew for a little while, and then eventually he might come back again and tell another story, illustrating a totally different point.

But here in our reading today, we have three back-to-back stories that all drive home the exact *same* point. And Jesus hardly even takes a breath between them. This is unusual. This is the only time in any of the gospels that he does this. And it is *very* intentional. It's as if Jesus is saying "this point that I am trying to make is *so* key – *so* central to who I am; to who God is – *so* critical – that I am going to repeat myself over

and over and over again until you get it. Didn't understand it the first time? Let me tell it to you another way. Didn't like my first example? Here's another."

And make no mistake: The stories that Jesus tells here are stories that people would not have liked. As beautiful as they are, I suspect that there are things that *you and I* don't much like about them. But like them or not, they are absolutely *central* to who God is. And because of that, Jesus wants to make absolutely certain that we do not miss what he is trying to say.

So, today we read the first parable – the parable of the lost sheep. But we cannot talk about one of these parables without talking about the other two as well, so here we go.

I like to call these the "lost and found" parables. The parable of the lost sheep, and the lost coin, and the lost son. The main point of every single one of them being that God rejoices when a sinful person repents. This message seems simple enough, but as we will quickly learn, none of these three stories are as simple as they seem. In fact, all three of them are actually ludicrous at best, and downright irresponsible at worst. They are stories that make me, a Type A Firstborn Child very uncomfortable.

So first we have the lost sheep. *Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?* The answer, of course, is that **not a single one of them** would do that. No shepherd in his right mind would leave a herd of 99 sheep **in the wilderness** (we are not talking about a safe, fenced-in pasture with sheepdogs to guard and corral them – we're talking about the wilderness, where there are foxes and wolves and wild cats and cliffs and cacti and all kinds of things that could hurt them). There is no shepherd out there who would put all 99 sheep at *great* risk to go after the one that wandered away. That would be ridiculous. Stupid. Reckless. Irresponsible.

And then, we have the story of the lost coin. A woman who has ten silver coins loses one of them. Now for her, it makes perfect sense that she would overturn everything in the house to go looking for her missing coin. That coin could very well mean the difference between putting food on the table or not, or paying rent that month or not. One silver coin at that time would have been worth roughly one day's wages – so, think...maybe about \$200 or so, in today's money. If I lost \$200, I would absolutely turn my house upside-down looking for it.

But here's where this story goes off the rails: once she finds the coin, she spends a lot more than \$200 throwing a big party for all her friends. It seems frivolous, wasteful. Almost like "What's the point? If you didn't really need that money for food, then why did you turn the whole house upside-down looking for it?"

And then, we have what is hands-down the most popular, and most well-known story of the three of them: the parable of the lost son.

This is the hard one for me. As I mentioned, I am the firstborn in my family. Growing up, I was always the one trying to hold all of the pieces of the family together when things got rough. Always working hard to make things easier for my little sister, and always harboring a bit of resentment when my sister was able to live a more carefree life than I was. I never felt like I had the freedom to be irresponsible, to get a bad grade or to go out partying or to rebel like all my friends were doing. It is easy for me to understand the injustice of this story – the injustice that the scribes were likely feeling as Jesus told the story. These were the law-keepers, after all. The responsible ones. The firstborns. The people who were enslaved to the burden of a well-lived life. Like the grumbling scribes, it is a lot harder for me to place myself at rock bottom in the feed trough with the younger son.

The scribes, who were having an incredibly hard time relating to the tax collectors and sinners who Jesus was treating like friends, would look at each of these three stories and say “This is absurd! To leave the 99 in the wilderness? To spend it all and more on a party? To celebrate over the younger son when the older son who does all the work and holds the family together gets *nothing*? It’s ridiculous! It’s unjust! And if it weren’t so maddeningly irresponsible it would be downright laughable!”

And they have a valid point. It *is* ridiculous. It *is* irresponsible. It is reckless, wasteful, foolish. The word we hear most often in reference to the story of the lost son is *prodigal*. Which probably most of us seem to interpret as wayward, or runaway. But that’s not what prodigal means. The definition of prodigal is *rashly or wastefully extravagant; giving or given in abundance; lavish or profuse*.

Here’s the thing. The younger son was not the only prodigal in these stories. Sure, he recklessly gambled away his inheritance and realized far too late that he had a problem. But the one that the scribes would be angry at was not *just* the son. It was the father who knew fully well who the son was and what the son had done, and threw a party for him anyway. The woman who spent a small fortune once she found her one small coin. The shepherd who went after the lost sheep, knowing fully well that in doing so he might lose everything.

In essence, Jesus is saying here that the prodigal of these three stories is **God**. *Extravagant. Abundant. Lavish. Profuse*. We have a God for whom it does not matter one iota whether we are the older son or the younger. Whether we are a scribe or a tax collector. Whether we are a sheep who prefers to hang out in the fold or venture out on our own. Whether we are lost with no food in the wilderness or at home living the safe and secure life. Whoever we are and however perfect or messy our lives look, that is irrelevant. This prodigal God is a God of a prodigal grace that every single one of us needs. And THIS grace is big enough and wild enough and lavish enough and extravagant enough that it can easily match our rebellion and counter our indignance. It

is a grace that will stop at nothing to find **both** the son who is lost in his indulgence and the son who is lost in his responsibility.

And wait...there's more. I think some of the amazing power of these stories is that Jesus doesn't just *tell* them, but he lives them. He puts his money where his mouth is. In fact, in Jesus's case, these stories are just the warm-up act for what is to come.

Because not too much later, we witness the lengths that Jesus is willing to go on behalf of *all of us*. The Father who killed the fatted calf to throw a party to celebrate his son; the woman who spent all she had throwing a party to celebrate what she had found; the shepherd who put it all on the line to go after that one sheep...we have a God who came down from heaven. Who gave it all up. Who laid down his very life. So that we might be invited to the party. You, and me. The sinners and the scribes alike. The people who feel like they have been pushed out and away from the church, as well as the people who have historically felt like the gatekeepers of the church.

Those responsible firstborns among us who so faithfully and dutifully show up, every week, week after week without fail and give and serve and then give and serve some more, and then give and serve yet again...and those wandering younger sons who have left to blaze their own path forward and may or may not ever find their way back again. Those whose lives and choices we respect and approve of, and those whose lives and choices may give us pause and may cause us a little bit of existential angst. Every single one of us, *without exception* is invited to the party that God throws to celebrate that what once was lost is now found.

And when we come, no matter who we are; no matter the direction that our life has taken up to this point; no matter how worthy or unworthy we might feel, when we show up at the party that God has thrown, we step into a place where the grace of God touches all of us – healing our sickness; mending our brokenness; calming our restlessness; softening our indignation. Giving us grace to look at one another as Jesus himself looks at us – as sheep worth chasing after, even if it costs us everything. As treasures worth turning everything upside down to find. As beloved sons worth embracing, even when we come at our worst.

So my friends, may you know this day that you are sought after. You are treasured. You are held in the loving embrace of our loving God. And God is calling us all to love one another in this same spirit of reckless abandon, modeling for one another the prodigal grace of a prodigal God.