

I didn't go to university right after high school. Instead, I took two years off from school to try to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. During this two year period, I worked at a Walmart in South Dakota. My job was to stock the shelves, mostly in the aisle with all the paper products and laundry detergent. So every day I would go in and stock paper products and detergents all day.

However, every now and then as I was stocking, someone would come over the announcement system and say that we have a Code Adam. Code Adam was our in-house code that a child had gone missing. When you hear that, no matter what department you're in, no matter what you're doing, you were supposed to drop everything you were doing and start looking for this lost kid.

At that point, nothing else matters. It doesn't matter if I'm trying to finish a cart full of products and I'm supposed to go home in a few minutes. It doesn't matter if I'm in the backroom looking for a specific product for a customer. When a child goes missing in a store as big as Walmart, everything else becomes secondary.

Today we're starting a new three-week series called Lost & Found looking at three parables Jesus tells in Luke chapter 15 about a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son. What does it mean to be lost? How do we respond to the lost? What are we willing to do in order to find what is lost? These are questions we're going to wrestle with during this series.

If you have a Bible with you, go ahead and turn to Luke chapter 15 this morning. We're going to start with the parable of the lost sheep in verses 1 through 7 this morning. If you don't have a Bible, all the Scripture and quotes we use this morning will be up on the screen behind me. So in Luke 15, one through seven, we read this:

"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he 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 neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' 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."

Let's pray.

So this chapter starts out in the first two verses say that the tax collectors and the sinners were all gathering around Jesus to listen to his teaching. This made the Pharisees and religious leaders upset and they grumbled about the fact that Jesus was eating with these people. Now in first-century Palestine who you ate with was a big deal.

This was known as table fellowship and essentially who you ate with with a statement about who you approved of. So by eating with sinners and tax collectors, Jesus was essentially saying they were worthwhile people. "Sinners" was a general, generic term for anyone who didn't fit within the Pharisees strict observance of the law. But tax collectors were another matter.

First-century Palestine was occupied by the Roman Empire and the way they maintained their occupation was through a military presence in the region. The way they paid for the military to be there was through heavily taxing the people in the area. The way they got those taxes were through tax collectors, which would usually be Jews themselves. Which means tax collectors were the Jews who were actively taking money from their own people to support to military occupation and subjugation of their homeland. Tax collectors were traitors. They were the lowest of the low, scum of the earth. There weren't words strong enough to describe the disdain good religious Jews had for tax collectors. And Jesus hangs out with them.

This is in sharp contrast to how the Pharisees and the religious teachers viewed sinners and tax collectors. There was a tractate, a commentary on the Old Testament, at the time that said, "Let not a man associate with the wicked, even to bring him near to the law." According to the Pharisees and their understanding of the Law, if someone was wicked, if someone was unrighteous, you shouldn't hang out with them, even in order to help them come to their senses and repent.

This is the context. Jesus tells these stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son in response to religious leaders who are questioning why he associates with sinners and tax collectors. And Jesus responds by saying suppose you have a hundred sheep and you lose one.

Everything about this parable is intentional. First of all, notice that he doesn't say, "Suppose you have a hundred sheep and one wanders off." No, he says, "You lose one". The onus is on the shepherd for losing the sheep rather than the sheep for being lost. Furthermore, why did Jesus use sheep in the story? At other times Jesus has told stories about an ox falling into a pit or weeds being sowed among the wheat or a mustard seed growing into a large tree. So why sheep? Why in this story does he specifically use sheep?

Throughout the Old Testament, the children of Israel are frequently referred to like a flock of sheep. Psalm 23, the famous psalm of David starts out, "The Lord is my shepherd, I want for nothing." In Jeremiah 31 the prophet proclaims, "He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd." The religious leaders and the Pharisees would have been familiar with this obvious analogy.

Furthermore, while God is seen as the ultimate shepherd, the spiritual leaders themselves are also shepherds of the flock. It's their responsibility to watch over the flock. So when Jesus starts off by saying, "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and you lose one of them..." The Pharisees would have picked up on this. In fact, this entire story is probably a reference to Ezekiel chapter 34.

Ezekiel 34 says this, "The word of the Lord came to me: 'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and

when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.”””

Right off that bat, this is an indictment of the religious leaders. “Why do you hang out with sinners and tax collectors Jesus?” Sure, let me tell you a story of a lost sheep. Why is the sheep lost? Because of the failures of the religious leaders. You, religious leaders, were so busy taking care of yourself, making sure you were clothed and well fed from the flock that you didn’t bother to take care of them.

David Neale says it this way in his commentary on Luke, “The imagery of lost sheep carries with it an implicit explanation: Sheep are lost because of failed leadership in Israel. The implied criticism is that the Pharisees are the failed shepherds in Ezekiel 34. They have not fulfilled their duty to seek the lost sheep of Israel.”

This should hit home with any and all of us who consider ourselves leaders in the church, myself included. These parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son start off with Jesus reminding leaders that it’s our responsibility to take care of the flock and if they’re lost, it’s our responsibility to do something about it.

There are a couple of important distinctions that we need to make here. First of all, let’s define the flock. If we pay attention through Luke’s gospel he spends an inordinate amount of time breaking down dividing walls. Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, men and women. None of these categories matter. As far as Luke’s gospel is concerned, there are only two categories: lost and found.

Neale, earlier in his commentary says this, “Luke's narrative has prepared us for this new understanding of the nature of the human plight and its solution. People are not 'wicked'/'rejected' but 'lost'. The 'righteous' are not 'elected'/'chosen' but 'found'. Luke redefines humanity in terms of two categories: lost and found.”

In fact, this is a theme Luke has Jesus coming back to again and again. Luke 5, “Jesus answered them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.’” Luke 19, “Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.’”

There is one flock and it's made up of everyone; all of us. And all of us fall into one of two categories, not Jew and Gentile, righteous and wicked, but lost and found. There are those of us who have been found and those of us who have yet to be found.

Secondly, let’s talk about fault versus responsibility. When it snows you have to shovel your driveway. It’s not your fault that it snowed, but it’s still your responsibility to deal with it. This is what Jesus is saying to the Pharisees. It’s not their fault that people are lost. It’s not their fault that these sinners don’t know the law. But it’s still their responsibility to guide them back. In the

same way, it's not our fault that people around us don't know Jesus. But it's still our responsibility to do something about it.

Jesus continues the parable. So let's say you have a hundred sheep and you lose one. Wouldn't you go after your lost sheep until you found it? Wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine who are safe and go in search of your lost sheep? And when you found it, you would carry it home. You would call all of your friends and neighbours and say, "Celebrate with me, I've found my lost sheep!" And he says in verse 7, "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."

This last line is a bit tongue-in-cheek because everyone needs to repent. All of us need to repent. Repentance isn't a one-time act but a regular occurrence where Jesus shows us new areas of our lives that don't line up with him. And it's great when we as Christians continue that lifestyle of repentance.

But Jesus says there is more joy in heaven over the one sinner who repents and returns home. There is more celebrating in heaven when the one lost sheep is found than over all the others. Think about that.

Every Sunday we gather together here to worship God. We sing, we give our offering, we serve in the nursery or in Storytime. And these things bring God joy. He loves when we do that. But that joy he feels over our corporate worship pales in comparison to the joy he feels when one of his lost children returns home. And if God cares that much about lost people than so should we.

It's not our fault that lost people are lost. But it's our responsibility, especially as church leaders —this one hundred percent starts with me—it's our responsibility to do something about it. Next week we're going to get a little more into the practical things we can do, but let me this week start with a couple questions.

Number one, are we searching for lost sheep? I mean this both individually and as a church. Are we actively looking for lost sheep or do we have a mentality that essentially says, "We'll leave the gate open and if the sheep happens to wander home, great." If a lost person happens to come into our church and finds Jesus great. If a lost person happens to ask me about my faith at work and I can tell them about Jesus, great. Are we actively looking for lost people or, if we're honest with ourselves, are we a little bit more passive in our search?

Secondly, what would it look like for our church to be the kind of place where sinners and tax collectors feel welcome? Sinners and tax collectors felt welcomed by Jesus. They wanted to hear from him and the Pharisees criticized Jesus for it. What would it look like in our lives and what would it look at around Faith Community Church for us to receive the same kind of criticism Jesus received? What would it mean for us to receive the same criticism Jesus received? That sinners and pagans and non-Christians want to come to our church. Would that be a bad thing?

Here's what I'd like you to do this week. Here's what I'm going to do this week. Who is someone you know that doesn't know Jesus? Who is someone you know who is lost and needs to be found? This week I want you to do two things.

First, pray for them. Pray that God would soften their heart and make them receptive to the gospel. Pray that God would give you opportunities to share your faith with that person. Second, invite them to church.

But what if you don't know any lost people? Pray about that too. Pray that God would lead you into situations where you can start to build real relationships with lost people.

Finally, if you're here this morning and you're thinking something to the effect of "Sure, lost people are important but we need to take care of ourselves first." If that's you, this week will you just pray that God would give you a heart for lost people? Or, if you're not convinced that lost people matter, just pray that God would give you a heart that reflects Jesus heart more. Just pray that your heart would mirror Jesus' heart when it comes to lost people. Let God take care of the rest.

The point of this parable is that lost people matter to God. And if lost people matter to God, then they should matter to us as well. We can be a church that reaches lost people. We can be a church that takes responsibility for finding lost people. The question we have to genuinely ask ourselves is, "Do we want to be that kind of a church?" Is seeking after the lost a value of ours?

Lost people matter to God. Do they matter to us? Let's pray.