

Sermon
“An Unnatural Act”
What’s So Amazing About Grace? Part 2
Luke 15:1-10
October 17, 2021

[slide 1]

Introduction Before the Sermon

Welcome to week 2 of our “Fall Focus” - this year entitled *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* after a book by Philip Yancey - during which are doing a deep dive into what the Bible calls, “grace” - in three different ways - in my messages here on Sunday mornings; by reading Yancey’s book - as influential a book as I’ve ever read, and by reinforcing what we are learning in small groups that are meeting during the week.

Last week in our introduction we saw grace lived out through Jesus extending it to a woman others wanted to condemn for adultery.

Today we hear Jesus teach two parables that not only help us understand grace, but its over-the-top nature. Our text comes from Luke 15. Let’s listen together.

[slide 2 - blank] Read Luke 15:1-10

Introduction

Ask anyone in my family and they will tell you that I am *[slide 3]* directionally challenged. Which is a fancy way of saying, I get lost easily. One time I turned the wrong way on the freeway at night and drove an hour away from our destination before realizing it and having to turn back. There was the time I was supposed to go meet Beth's dad (I was going to ask him for his blessing to marry Beth) but I got lost in the mall below his offices in downtown Seattle. Or the time in Costa Rica I forgot to get off the bus and ended at the end of the line in the mountains in the middle of nowhere in a monsoon.

Or the time I dropped off Beth and my daughter and her friend (her friend was on crutches) near Stanford stadium for a USA women's soccer match - and then went to find a parking spot - and met them inside for the game. However, afterwards as I was leaving the stadium, I realized ... I had no idea where I had parked. A full ninety minutes later I found the car - then went back to get the girls - only to find when I got to them, I had no idea how to get back to the car I'd found once already. and so spent another hour searching before I found it!

I'm familiar with being lost.

Which is why I relate well *[slide 4]* to our passage this morning, in which Jesus uses lost things - a lost sheep and a lost coin - to teach us some important things about ourselves, God, and His grace. As it begins, a group Luke calls the *[slide 5]* “*tax collectors and [notice the quotes] ‘sinners’*” had gathered to listen to Jesus. As you’ve heard me say before, *tax collectors* were universally hated as Jews who made their living by collecting taxes from the oppressive and hated Roman Empire, and got rich by cheating their own people and collecting more than was required. *Sinners*” in quotes was a word used to refer to those respectable people saw as hardcore sinners - prostitutes, drunkards, and others judged to be at the extremes of bad. Together, “*tax collectors and ‘sinners’*” was used as a kind of colloquialism that meant something like “scum of the earth.”

Jesus’ interaction with them raised a red flag for a second group - a group we talked about in depth last week *[slide 6]* - “*the Pharisees and teachers of the law.*” These were the religious leaders of the day - who believed that the way one became right with God - in good standing with Him - was by obeying God’s law (as they defined it), which included keeping oneself separate from “*sinners*”

so as to not be polluted by their unrighteousness. Which is why they could not fathom why Jesus would waste his time on them - why they “muttered” *[slide 7]*: “*This man welcomes sinners ... and eats with them.*” Remember, in the day, eating was someone was about more than calorie intake - it was seen as an act of hospitality - and of acceptance - of welcoming someone as family.

How could Jesus accept such people?

In response, Jesus teaches using our parables, and starts *[slide 8]*, in the first one, *by implying* this: *[slide 9]* that *people are like a lost sheep*. Now we need to know that today many of us have a different image of sheep than people did in Jesus’ day. We tend to think of them as cute - I had a friend who called them, “fluffy little clouds with legs.” We in our valley have a festival to celebrate them - last week people flocked from all over the country to watch their silly antics as they paraded down Main Street.

First century people had a different perspective. They did not celebrate sheep, but saw them as creatures to look down upon. When they heard Jesus refer to a sheep getting lost, they would have thought something like, “Yup, stupid sheep.” And while I’m not a

sheep expert, it is clear they are anything but bright - one account has one sheep walking off a cliff to its death ... and more than thousand following after it - though after awhile they didn't all die as they began to bounce off those already fallen! Sheep aren't even smart enough to fight back - if a predator finds one alone, it just becomes a snack.

Sheep are also directionally challenged - writes one ex-shepherd pastor: a sheep ...

loses its directions continually ... even when you find a lost sheep [it] will not follow you home. So when you find it, you must seize it ... tie its legs together and carry it home. That's the only way to save a lost sheep.¹

If a dog gets lost, when you find it, it will most likely follow you home. Not a sheep. They are totally incapable of participating in their own saving. Which is why in the parable, when the shepherd finds the sheep, he puts "it on his shoulders" and physically carries it "home."

All of which is why when Jesus calls people lost sheep, it is in Timothy Keller's words, "a spiritual insult." We are not just cute

¹ Quoted in a sermon by Timothy Keller, found at http://sermons2.redeemer.com/sites/sermons2.redeemer.com/files/sermons/PC-He_Welcomes_Sinners.mp3 accessed 9/30/10

animals that happen to lose their way, but spiritually directionless - *[slide 10]* totally incapable of doing anything to help save ourselves. We are not, if you would just lost ... we are *[slide 11]* utterly lost.

The theological term for this is called “total depravity.” Which doesn’t mean that there nothing good about us but instead that everything has been warped by sin - our pushing God aside and living for ourselves - leaving us not only separated from God and the life that comes in relationship with Him, but even worse - separated from Him and unable to do anything to restore that relationship on our own.

Now this perspective is not always well received in our culture, where we like to try and paint humanity as basically good and as just needing some education and moral guidance to make ourselves better. But two world wars, the holocaust, 9/11, multiple genocides, and the ongoing abuses that continue to plague humanity - human trafficking, child abuse, racism - you fill in the blank - all point to something much bigger being wrong with humanity.

And if we are honest, most of us recognize that sin isn’t just a problem in general, but a problem for each of us personally. We see

it in our angry outbursts, our judgmental attitudes, our lustful self-indulgence, our push-others-down competitiveness, our materialistic greed.

The root cause? Jesus implies it is because we are lost in sin. And not just lost, but lost and unable to help ourselves - utterly lost.

Which is why what we need is not so much a teacher to educate us, a role model to be an example for us, or a leader to inspire us - no we are far too lost for these. What we need is a Savior to rescue us.

Pause for a moment to hear *[slide 12]* the next thing Jesus says about us in his second parable, where He implies people are like a *[slide 13]* **lost coin**. This image too has lost much of its impact today, as inflation has made coins less significant - today if I drop a quarter, I might not look for it - it's just not worth that much.

This is not what it is being described in the parable - the lost coin was much more than the extra nickels we throw into the change jar. For the *[slide 14]* "silver coins" to which Jesus is referring were drachmas - each worth about a day's wages - a large amount for most people of the day. In addition, since people then didn't

normally use banks, losing one represented 1/10th of the family's life savings.

In short, the lost coin was extremely valuable.

Here's the good news - in God's eyes, we are like this coin - extremely valuable. In fact, according to the Bible, we are more than extremely valuable - God sees us as *[slide 15] infinitely valuable* - in fact, what the Scripture indicates there is nothing more valuable to God than people.

Why? Not for the same reasons our world judges people as valuable - which is this: if you have money, a high IQ, the right business model - if you can sing beautifully, run fast, thrown hard, have curves in the right place, live a generous enough lifestyle - then you are valuable.

Jesus had a completely different perspective. He saw everyone - no matter who they were - rich or poor, talented or ordinary, healthy or sick, young and old ... moral and immoral - he saw them all as infinitely valuable - not because of what they have, what they've done - or how good they are - but because of this *[slide 16]* -

because they are created by God in His image. Yes, that image has been ruined by sin - but that does not take away our value to God.

Thus what we hear Jesus saying is this *[slide 17]*: we are *utterly lost in in sin*, but at the very same time, *are infinitely valuable to God!*

Transition

Now, these parables do not just teach us about ourselves *[slide 18]*, but about God - which we see in characteristics of the shepherd and the woman. And here the first: *God is a God [slide 19] who seeks the lost!* For notice that no time is given in the parables as to how the sheep or the coin got lost. No chastising of the sheep for running away, no describing the circumstances regarding the coin. No, the focus is completely on the seeker. A shepherd discovers one of his sheep is gone - what does he do? *[slide 20]* Goes after it. A woman discovers a coin is lost. What does she do? *[slide 21]* Searches for it.

God, Jesus is saying, is like this shepherd and this woman - except what He is seeking is lost people.

It is just this that makes Christianity unique. For every other religion in the world focuses on - in some form or another - what we need to do to get right with God. Whether it be Buddhism's eightfold path, the Hindu karma, the Muslim law code or the Jewish law - each is focused on our efforts to get to God.

Which is why what Jesus taught was so eye-opening - even shocking - in the day. Jesus taught that though we like sheep are utterly lost - can't do anything to get to God - that God sees us as so valuable that He takes the initiative to come after us! Writes one scholar: "This is the one absolutely new thing which Jesus taught... about God ... that He actually searched for men [and women]."

But notice - Jesus says God not only seeks the lost - but does so how? In *[slide 22] an over-the-top, even reckless way*. The shepherd - in an example of what Yancey in our book describes as the "new math of grace" *[slide 23]* - in going after one sheep, leaves the other ninety-nine in the wilderness, presumably vulnerable to predators or rustlers, or to getting lost themselves. That's how much God loves us - so much that the best way to describe that love is by an act that is perhaps irresponsible!

Or consider the woman who lost her coin. Mightn't it made sense for to think, "Since I lost it in the house, I'm sure it will turn up someplace?" But no! *[slide 24]* - she scours the house - one senses almost frantically - in order to find the lost coin.

I'm reminded of the time Beth was cleaning the house and suddenly realized she lost the diamond in her wedding ring somewhere - and in a panic began searching for it. While I saw the situation as hopeless - even if it were in the house and not outside or down a drain, how would we ever find it? But Beth, driven by the importance of that diamond to her, searched every inch of the house - every nook and cranny - every corner - every piece of furniture - but didn't find it. She finally decided to go through the garbage she remembered taking out, and after sifting through all the refuse, guess what? She found that diamond stuck to a used paper towel!

Jesus is saying, "This is what God is like!" He spares no effort in seeking us - even entering into the garbage of our world not just to teach us, to be an example to us, or to inspire us - but to seek us out to save us. It meant humbling Himself by becoming a human being. Being mocked by society's leaders. Betrayal by his closest friends. An unjust trial. And then of course, it meant a torturous death - a

death He died on our behalf - in our place - bearing all of human sin in His own body for us - in our place - and offers us instead of the death we deserve, the life that comes in a relationship with God through Himself.

Doing whatever it took in order to save what He sees as a precious diamond - each one of us.

What motivated Jesus to such over-the-top, and even reckless seeking? Just this - there is nothing He loves more than when the lost are found - in fact, *[slide 25] He celebrates when the lost are found*. For notice what both the shepherd and the woman do when they find what is lost. They are so excited that they *[slide 26]* tell everyone to “*rejoice with me*” over what has been found!

Which is why the climax to both parables is the same *[slide 27]*: “*there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous person who do no need to repent.*” This is not Jesus saying that this is the right ratio between sinners and righteous in the world. No, he’s using hyperbole to make this point - how much joy it brings to God when people repent.”

And what is repentance? While many of think it means being really, really sorry, and this is not all wrong, it misses the word's real emphasis. "Repent" simply means "turn around and choose a new direction" - to stop heading away from Jesus, and to turn and start heading toward him.

And here's the good news. When we turn, what we find is that God is already there. He's like a crazy shepherd who will leave ninety-nine to seek the one. He's like a desperate woman who will tear her house apart - even tearing through the garbage - to find a lost coin.

Which is why I want to do two things as I close *[slide 28- blank]*. First, ***I want to call us to embrace God' over-the-top love.*** To focus on the fact that though we were lost - utterly lost - He came so we might found.

Allow that reality to wash over you. Understand what He's done.

And here's why. Because as you hear me say all the time, our problem as people is not that we don't love God enough, though that is also true. Our real problem is that we don't really grasp how much God loves us. Because if we did, there is nothing we could do

but fall on our knees and love Him back. Let the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God we see in the shepherd and the woman - overwhelm you - and begin to love Him back.

And then this last thing. If you have never experienced being found by Jesus, know that you can. Right now. Turn away from the direction you are headed, and turn toward Him. For if you do, what you will find is this - that He's been there all along, because He is a God who seeks. And know that when you turn to follow Him in this way, that there is great rejoicing in heaven.

Let's pray.