

Lost things

Luke 15:1-32

So Jesus was in a place, where is not important for us, and He was being thronged by the tax collectors and sinners. We know why. Jesus loved them. He was honest with them about their sins. He called them out of the lives they were living. He respected their personhood and believed that they were capable of change and transformation. He gave them hope and they loved Him for it. Jesus did not dismiss anyone as too far gone or too needy or as a waste of time. Even His own disciples sometimes had trouble with Jesus' inclusiveness. They wanted to keep the children away but Jesus would have none of that. They treated the blind man of John 9 as if he were a theological problem rather than as a man who could be healed. They told blind Bartimaeus to be quiet but Jesus heard his cries and gave him the gift of sight.

The tax collectors could be compared to the rich of our day who have cheated any and everyone who might have been in their way to get what they wanted. Mafia bosses, mafia soldiers, drug dealers, gang members, convicted white collar felons, dishonest politicians, and power hungry manipulators wherever they might be found, these and their ilk are the tax collectors of our day. Jesus enjoyed these people. He did not compromise the truth but called upon them to change as He invited them to join His band and become disciples. They were open to His message because they were miserable in the lives they were leading. They were troubled by guilt and they knew they deserved to go to hell for all the suffering that they had brought upon so many. They were used to the condemnation of the religious and resented their airs of superiority. Jesus was like nothing they had ever imagined. A truth speaker who cared about them. A man who was willing to take a chance and to believe in them. They flocked to Jesus.

People often identify the sinners as the prostitutes. So Jesus was thronged by tax collectors and prostitutes. No doubt, the prostitutes were sinners and some of those who followed Jesus with great enthusiasm had been prostitutes. But the

sinner described here would not have been limited to so precise an identification. Remember the question of the disciples about the blind man of John 9? They asked Jesus who was responsible for his blindness (he was born blind) himself or his parents? Anyone who suffered from some kind of a handicap whether physical, as in the case of any debilitating malady, or mental, as in the case of a person that we today call special needs, or even the spiritual handicap of demon possession, all of these would have been called sinners by the upright, proud and religious Pharisees. Remember when the friends brought the paralyzed man to Jesus by lowering him through the roof? Jesus looked down at the man and said, "I forgive you." Everyone was outraged. You can't forgive a paralyzed man when his condition makes it obvious that God has cursed him. For them, if he was paralyzed, then he was still in his sin. So Jesus said what difference does it make if I say to him, 'You are forgiven.' or if I say, 'Rise take up your bed and walk.' The Pharisees lived in a static world. Sinners were sinners and they could become nothing else. Jesus lived in a dynamic world where sinners need not remain such. They were fully capable of faith and could experience the healing and transforming power of the God who knew and loved them. The sinners of today would include the homeless who are mentally ill, and the homeless who are drug addicted, and the homeless who steal and who trash the streets. Today's sinners are those whose lives are spinning out of control due to prescription opiate addiction, or alcoholism, or smoking dope, or addiction to meth or cocaine or heroin. Today's sinners are caught up in sex addiction, porn addiction, food addiction, workaholicism, anything that enslaves and destroys and that keeps us from a consistent walk with the Lord makes us sinners in respect to our lifestyle. The human reality is that sinning gets old. We indulge in sin because we have been deceived, not because it's all that. Sinners long to find a way out of the life. Jesus loved sinners and believed in them and He gave them hope. So they thronged Him. Are sinners thronging the church today? Maybe, we are not as much like Jesus and even a little more like the Pharisees than we would like to be.

So when the sinners were thronging to Jesus, the Pharisees, the religious leaders, complained about it. If Jesus were respectable then He would want to be around

us rather than them is what they were meaning to say. Jesus ate with sinners. He treated them as if they were some sort of equals. It was an outrage. Jesus was to them, an embarrassment to the Bible.

Jesus knew what they were thinking and He knew what they were saying whether it was just under their breath, or privately to each other, and when they were spinning their scorn in an attempt to erode His following. Responding to all of this, Jesus started telling stories. We know the stories. A shepherd had a hundred sheep but when one was lost, he left the 99 in the wilderness no less and pursued the lost sheep until he found it. He carried back the lamb with a heart filled with joy and at the soonest opportunity he called his friends and neighbors together so that they could share the joy of finding and rescuing what had been lost.

Then the woman who had ten coins lost one of them. As soon as she realized that it was missing she dropped everything and turned her house upside down in her search for the missing coin. Finally, she found it and so she called all of her neighbors and friends together and threw a big party so that they could rejoice with her since she had found the piece that was lost.

In these first two stories Jesus made a direct comparison to heaven's joy over every single sinner who repents. In the last story such a comparison was not made - possibly because it was so obvious that it did not need saying.

The man had two sons and one of them, the younger son, demanded his inheritance now. The pleadings of his father fell on deaf ears and so the father gave him the money and he lost no time in leaving home behind in order to make his fortune far away. Well, he made very foolish choices and partied until nothing was left of the great fortune that he had secured from his dad. Times turned bad and he had nothing. None of his "friends" would help him. He took the most humiliating job - feeding pigs! And he was so hungry that he stole their food and ate it himself. Then, after a time, he came to himself and thought of home. He thought of the servants back home that he had despised and treated badly. They are much better off than I am and so he resolved to return home. He would become a new man. I don't deserve to be my father's son but surely he will be

compassionate enough to allow me to be a servant. I'll take any job he wants to give me. So, he started the journey. He had a long way to go. It was hard and he had no means to make the journey comfortable. He might very well have been abused, he may have stolen goods and had close calls, and he most certainly nearly starved on the way home. When he was still a long way off but in more familiar surroundings, his dad came out of nowhere to embrace him with tears of joy. His dad had missed him. He had been waiting for him to come back. He looked for him from a high place nearly every day. The boy stood by his resolve. He offered to serve and confessed that he no longer deserved to be called "son." These words fell on deaf ears as his father spontaneously organized a great feast to celebrate his return. The music, the dancing, the gargantuan spread of food and delicacies were beyond any party the father had ever thrown. Only one person was missing, the elder brother came home late from work. He was shocked. What's going on? When they said, "Your brother's come home!" his heart fell to his knees. He felt disgust and anger and a resentment deeper than any emotion he had ever experienced. He was livid with rage and he confronted his father. "Dad, what are you doing?" He has wasted everything. He doesn't deserve this. You've never done anything like this for me and I work hard for you every day. The father replied, "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."

Everyone there heard the stories. In that sense, there is something in the stories for everyone. But Jesus addressed the stories to the Pharisees who complained because Jesus allowed the sinners and tax collectors to throng around Him instead of putting them in their place. For them, the joy over the found sheep and coin was clearly over the top. What makes a lost sheep or coin more valuable than the ones that remain secure. How could you risk the 99 or take your eyes off the nine to seek a single lost sheep or coin? And the older brother was right. What a waste of money to throw such an ostentatious party for such a loser. You know he'll be gone again within the week - once he gets his hands on some money. Whatever Jesus thinks that heaven feels about these things, He's wrong!

Jesus declared the heart of heaven and the compassion of the Father for sinners, the kind who are lost and who seem to have no hope. These are the people whom God particularly loves to help and heal, to welcome home and to give new beginnings. Jesus had a purpose in telling these stories to us. The first of which is to test our hearts.