Most people like a good joke so I thought I’d start this morning’s message with a little bit of humor:

The Reverend Billy Graham told a story about a time early in his ministry when he arrived in a small town to preach a sermon. He wanted to mail a letter first so he asked a young boy where the post office was. After the boy had told him, Dr. Graham thanked him and said, "If you'll come to the Church this evening, you can hear me telling everyone how to get to Heaven."
"I don't think I'll be there," the boy said. "You don't even know your way to the post office."\(^1\) (Okay, Letterman has nothing to worry about).

Well, I would like to think that just as most people like a decent joke, most Christians like a good parable. Or at least they ought to.

Jesus taught his disciples and the crowds that followed him using parables. He used these simple stories to describe situations people then, and now, we can easily relate to.

A farmer. A rich man. A poor widow. And so on.

And yet, in every one of these stories, there was always something… different, something odd, something not quite right.

The parables of Jesus begin with real life conditions, but they go places and have endings that are almost like something out of the “Twilight Zone.”

There’s a song from a popular Broadway show from about 50 years ago with lyrics that go like this:

Something familiar, something peculiar,
Something for everyone, a comedy tonight.

Something appealing, something appalling,
Something for everyone, a comedy tonight.
(Can anyone name that tune?)
The song is “Comedy Tonight” from “A Funny Thing Happened on the way to the Forum.”
And just like the song says, the parables Jesus told are **familiar**, yet **peculiar**. They **appeal** to us on emotional and spiritual levels, but they **appall** the sensibilities of the self-righteous. Listen again to today’s stories for the absurdity in these situations:

- A man with a hundred sheep leaves 99 of them alone in the wilderness and goes off in search of one lost sheep. Think about this for a minute. So you have 99 sheep, worth far more than the one that got lost, and you leave them alone in the wilderness to search for the lost one? Are you really going to risk the entire herd for one lost sheep?
- A woman with 10 coins loses one and sweeps and searches until she finds it. Really? You’re serious. You lose one coin and you spend hours looking for it? So I have 10 dimes in my pocket and I drop one and I’m going to spend hours looking for it?

And if this isn’t absurd enough, the people in both parables follow up by rejoicing when they find their lost goods.

It makes you wonder: What world do these people live in?
Do they have their priorities straight?
Don’t they know any better?

Well, the world they inhabit is not the Twilight Zone after all—it’s the Kingdom of God. And these parables Jesus told are designed specifically to tell us what this God and God's Kingdom are like.

They always start with something that people can readily identify with.

“Which one of you,” Jesus begins, “having a hundred sheep.”
Now right there is something remarkable. Anyone owning a hundred sheep in Jesus’ day would be well off. Very well off, in fact, considering that most Palestinian farmers at this time might own 10 or fewer sheep. And if we picture ourselves as the sheep owner, we’re feeling pretty good about now. A hundred sheep? I like that!

Jesus continued: “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?”

This is where it gets a little weird. Absurd, even. But let’s answer Jesus’ question: “who goes after the one that is lost until he finds it?”

Answer: “no one.”

That’s right. No one in their right mind is going to leave a big flock of sheep to chase after one that’s gone missing. It’s an easy answer; just do the math. Ninety-nine sheep, safe where you can watch them, versus one that’s lost. No contest, right?

No one doing the math would go after that one lost sheep and leave the others alone in the wilderness. It’s too risky.

But God would.

And that’s the whole point of the story. God would risk it all to go after one lost sheep, one lost soul, just to give the lost one a second chance.

This isn’t math the way we reckon it.

This is Kingdom math.

Math of the heart.

---


Math that tells us that one, solitary lost sheep is worth walking miles in the desert heat for; worth spending hours traversing a dangerous wilderness for; worth risking 99 others for...just to give the one a chance at new life. (1100: Star Trek, tension between “the needs of the many, outweighs the needs of the one” versus “the needs of the one outweighs the needs of the many.”)

The same is true in the parable of the lost coin. “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?”

In this case, there may be a little more reason to search for that one lost coin than there was for the one lost sheep. You see the coins probably were the woman’s dowry. Poor villagers during this time had small dowries, consisting of property or money, meant to support a woman and her children later on in life. They were a matter of public honor and status in the community—an important part of marriage contracts between families. Losing even one of these coins was a disaster, not just for the woman, but also for the family’s honor.⁴

So she searched high and low, lit a candle in her small peasant hovel, swept the dirt floor until she finally finds it.

And then she does the unthinkable—she celebrates with her friends. It should have been shameful for her to acknowledge the loss of the coin. But her joy was too much to contain. Her joy was greater than her shame.

And that’s how it is with God, too. There is no shame when one who was
lost is found by God.
There is only uncontainable joy.
This is the nature of God, a nature that is revealed in these parables.
This is not a God who sits idly by as his children wander off searching for
God.
This is the God of the full pursuit, the God who relentlessly, tirelessly seeks
us out. The God who will stop at nothing to find us, offer us grace, and then
rejoice when we turn from our ways and follow God’s ways of love and
mercy and grace.
Jesus said: “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents
than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”
But wait. Everyone needs repentance. The Psalms tell us that no one is
good but God alone. The Apostle Paul reminded us that: “all have sinned
and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). No one is perfect. No
one even comes close. So why did Jesus say the righteous need no
repentance?
He said this for the sake of his audience. Not the tax collectors and sinners
who were sitting at the table with him.
The other audience.
The Pharisees and scribes—the legalistic religious experts of their day.
They were watching Jesus as—once again—Jesus ate with sinners, offering
God’s mercy and grace to all the wrong people.
Actually, Jesus was being sarcastic here. Actually, he was telling them that
they, too, needed to repent because even they have fallen short of God’s
glory.
But they didn’t get it.
They just sat there, disapproving, complaining about the company Jesus kept because “those people” were lost. They were not worth finding. And, truth be told, that can be us some times. At one time or another, we’ve all had a streak of the Pharisee in us.

We all develop our own ideas about what it means to be right; what other people have to believe, or do, to conform to our ways of thinking; to be good, religious people. And if they don’t conform to our way of thinking, we see “the wrong kind of people”; we close ourselves off to them, and judge them unworthy.

That is the mind of the Pharisee. They didn’t like seeing the wrong people being blessed. They resented it and disapproved.

A Jewish story tells of the good fortune of a hardworking farmer. The Lord appeared to this farmer and granted him three wishes, but with the condition that whatever the Lord did for the farmer would be given double to his neighbor. The farmer could hardly believe his good fortune, so he wished for a hundred cattle. Immediately he received a hundred cattle, and he was overjoyed until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred. So he wished for a hundred acres of land, and again he was filled with joy. Until he saw that his neighbor had two hundred acres of land. Rather than celebrating God’s goodness, the farmer could not escape feeling jealous and slighted because his neighbor had received more than he. Finally, he stated his third wish: that God would strike him blind in one eye. And God wept. But the Pharisees do not get their way. Because God specializes in finding the lost, and celebrates over those who turn to God's ways.

Some years ago in Spain, a father and son had become estranged. The son ran away, and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally, in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a Madrid newspaper. The ad read: “Dear Paco, meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is

---

forgiven. I love you. Your Father.” On Saturday 800 Pacos showed up, looking for forgiveness and love from their fathers.\(^6\)

We can relate to this, can’t we? Because all of us, at one time or another, have lost our way. We’ve all fallen short of God’s perfect plan and intention for our lives. This is what it means to be human.

But no matter how many times we fail, no matter what we’ve done wrong, no matter how lost we become, God is always out there looking for us. God is always ready to welcome us back.

Then God throws a party, and all heaven rejoices!\(^7\)

And we are invited to join the celebration.

I’m going to end this morning’s message with a time of prayer. As we bow our heads, I want to invite us to rededicate our lives to Christ. All of us have gone astray or missed the mark in some way. All of us have said or done things we are not proud of. All of us have been lost at one time or another. Maybe you are lost right now and can’t seem to find your way home. You need to know that God is already looking for you, reaching out to you with a love that knows no limits, no bounds.

Or maybe you are hearing this story of God’s limitless love for you for the first time. Whatever the case, I want you to pray silently with me now:

God, I am tired of running. I feel like I have been going in circles, making my life up as I go, and it isn’t working out the way I planned. So today, right now, I dedicate my life to you. Take me as I am, Lord. Be the one true Lord of my life. Lead me into paths of right living for your sake, and not my own. Shape me into the person you would have me become. Thank you, God, for finding me in the wilderness. Let me rejoice with all those in heaven and on earth for every lost soul you find. Into your capable and loving hands I commit my life, my soul, my entire being. Amen.
