

September 15, 2013 Luke 15:1-10 Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 “It’s About *God!*”

Use Psalm 23, too

Children’s time in Winsted: I have a mirror that will show us who God loves - YOU!

In school when I was growing up, there were always some students who could get away with anything when it came to their parents. They could cut class without getting caught, they could be wild in terms of party behavior, and they never seemed to have a curfew. They seemed to have everything they wanted: fancy cars when they were old enough to drive, money to eat out and go to shows, the best clothes.... It was easy to feel a bit jealous.... I especially remember a girl named Linda. She seemed to have every advantage: she was pretty and popular, was a cheerleader and boys really liked her.... But one night I had opportunity to spend the night at her house, and what I learned about her situation stopped my envy in its tracks.

I was one of five girls at Linda’s sleepover. I saw her mother once in all the time I was there, when she came downstairs pretty well drunk and barely clothed to throw her husband’s suitcase out on their front lawn.... We never did see him and to this day I don’t know why he wasn’t there. We stayed up all night, and Linda offered us cigarettes and alcohol.... Then her brother, who was just old enough to drive, took us joy-riding in his new Ford Thunderbird convertible, probably sometime between midnight and two in the morning. No parents, no food except whatever snacks we got out of the cupboards, nothing. Just a fancy house with parents who seemed anything but interested in what their children were doing.

That was my one time at Linda’s house, because my parents would never let me return after I told them some about my experience. After that night I saw Linda differently.... more a poor little rich girl than anybody I have ever known since.. nobody was willing to make the effort to care about her. In high school she made bad grades and finally dropped out.... I often wonder what happened to Linda.

What does this have to do with the scripture lessons? A lot. The Bible gives us a strong bad-news, good-news message: God is no absentee or indifferent parent! Even in the darkest, most difficult times of our lives, God is with us. God loves us - big-time - and God cares - big-time - what we do or do not do with our lives. In the passage from Jeremiah, this meant trouble, because the people of Judah had turned their backs on God and God had decided to punish them harshly. In the Gospel lesson, though, Jesus showed something else about God: how eager God is to seek out and save the lost.

Jesus compared God to a shepherd who went to tremendous lengths to find one lost sheep, even risking the safety of the other ninety-nine sheep to do so. And Jesus went on to suggest that heaven was like a woman desperately searching for her lost coin, the one she had to find in order to have any food that day, and how, when she found the coin, she was so relieved that she invited everybody to rejoice with her that she had found it.

It’s hard for us to grasp the power of these comparisons. In Jesus’ day, women were basically powerless, on the fringes of society. And shepherds were low on status and money, on the bottom of the social ladder. The fact that Jesus used these two to illustrate the nature of heaven

and God would have shocked the people of his day.

Listen to William Willimon's perspective on this scripture: "Heaven goes wild over just one sinner who repents. But these stories are not really about sinners – lost, repentant, or otherwise. A sheep or a coin has not really decided to be lost, nor can sheep or coins repent.

"The most interesting characters in the story are the searching shepherd and the resourceful woman.In their desperate searching, even risking the safety of the 99 in the case of the shepherd, they show us a God who is anything but a dispassionate, cool, disinterested bureaucrat. This God seeks, searches, finds, and saves. ... Jesus' introduction to the parable is revealing: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep?... The answer, of course, is NONE of us would behave in this way. All of us know that it is not rational to risk 99 good sheep in order to search for one that is lost. All of us know that only one lost coin is not worth tearing up the carpet or moving all the heavy appliances out into the yard to find. Which is precisely the point: **God is different from the way we are!** Here is the God whose Son says, 'I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.'.... But listen carefully. This is not a story about us, or some new program or project for our betterment. This is a story about GOD, God who throws parties in heaven for sinners, for the lost who have been found. The main requirement for being found by Jesus is to be lost." (adapted from William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, p. 46-47)

The Pharisees in Jesus' day certainly did not consider themselves to be lost; they were following the rules, playing the game properly, so they believed themselves to be doing just fine in the sight of God. For the most part, so did the people of Judah in Jeremiah's day. They had the Temple there in Jerusalem, and they thought that God would keep the Temple safe. In a lot of ways, we who come to church regularly may fall into the same danger, that of assuming that because we're church-goers and don't steal, murder, or whatever we think we shouldn't do, that we've "crossed the creek," so to speak, and can consider ourselves not needing to worry about God.

In his book, *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith*, the late Michael Yaconelli wrote about a kind of lostness with these words: "The death of the soul is never quick. It is a slow dying, a succession of deaths that continues until we wake up one day on the edge of God's voice, on the fringe of God's belovedness, beyond the adventure of God's claim on our lives.

"...in Northern California where I live,...cows are everywhere. One morning I came across an old story told by a farmer, which explains how cows end up on the road and lost:

A cow is nibbling on a tuft of grass in the middle of a field, moving from one tuft to the next. Before you know it, she ends up at some grass next to the fence. Noticing a nice clump of grass on the other side of the fence, the cow stumbles through an old tear in the fences and finds herself outside on the road. 'Cows don't intend to get lost,' the farmer explained, 'they just nibble their way to lostness.'

The farmer didn't know it, but he was talking about more than cows. None of us intends to have

our souls wander onto the dull and listless highway of the American way. First comes the tuft of education, then the tuft of marriage, then children, a new home, and one day we wake up to discover that we have nibbled our way to lostness.” (*Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith*, Michael Yaconelli, Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1998)

Today’s lessons want to get our attention.. They are like a mirror for us. We may see ourselves in them, as people who have trusted in things other than God, as people who have “nibbled our way” through life without really investing in our Creator-Savior, or perhaps as persons God has found and saved and celebrated.....

Two scriptures today... where are WE in them? Are we Pharisees who feel that we’ve already got our admission ticket and are comfortable with the thought that certain other less desirable folks are not even on God’s scope any more? Are we like the people of Judah, quick to either turn to other offers of “security” or to say, “Don’t sweat it, God won’t let anything bad happen to us”? And the most important question: Are we willing to realize that this “religion stuff” is more about GOD than it is about us? That it is what GOD is doing – seeking the lost, even us – that is important; that it is what GOD wants, not what we might be expecting or demanding, that finally matters.... Can we see it?

One last story for this sermon. It is a story by John Sumwalt, entitled, “The Lost Dog.”

There was once an elderly man who had a little Heinz-57 dog. He figured the dog was part black lab, part dalmatian, part Chihuahua, a little German shepherd, some French poodle, Great Dane, Russian wolfhound, Irish setter, golden retriever, bloodhound, Alaskan husky, springer spaniel, collie, rottweiler, west highland terrier, greyhound, beagle, dachshund, bulldog, St. Bernard -- your basic street-bred mutt -- but the old man loved him because he was all he had. They were constant companions, going everywhere and doing everything together. Every night the dog slept at the foot of the old man's bed.

Then one day the dog disappeared. He was playing in the yard one moment, and the next thing the old man knew he was gone. The old man searched everywhere for him -- looked on every street corner, around every corner, and talked to every neighbor -- but the dog was nowhere to be found. The old man searched all over the town, calling out the dog's name as he went, listening in vain for his familiar bark. The next day was the same, and the one after that... for weeks the old man searched, until finally his neighbors and friends told him that there was no use in looking anymore. Surely the dog is dead, they said, hit by a car, no doubt, and crawled off by himself to die.

Even so, the old man would not give up. Every night before bed, he went out on the porch and called out his dog's name at the top of his voice. This went on for several months. The neighbors were sure that the old man had lost his mind; they thought maybe somebody should put him in a home. But finally one night as the old man was calling his name, the little spotted dog came home. The old man never knew where he had been or what caused him to stay away so long, but he was very glad that he had never stopped calling his name. His heart celebrated! (*What are*

we to hear from this story? That our God never stops calling our names.) (From *StoryShare*, CSS Publishing, John Sumwalt, altered by fte)

May today's message offer both challenge and hope for us all.... May it challenge us to wake up to the constant presence and stiff demands of our God; may it give us hope as it promises us that God has never stopped and will never stop calling our names and waiting for us to turn with all our hearts, minds, and strength to the One who made us, the One who is always with us, the One who knows everything good and bad about us and still loves us, and the One who will finally lead us and welcome us home. Thank God! Amen.