



northminster presbyterian church

2400 old alabama road  
roswell, georgia 30076

16-Sep-2007

**SCRIPTURE:** 1 Timothy 1:1-17 Luke 15:1-10

**SERMON:** 1% Lost, 100% Savior (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

In the world and culture of the Ancient Near East, table manners were, and still are a big deal! Jesus' gregarious table manners were causing some pious and powerful religious leaders to get in a stew! These Pharisees were nattering out loud, to anyone who would listen, about the riffraff with whom Jesus was dining: women, tax collectors, prostitutes, outcasts, and sinners of all shapes. The Pharisees disdained Jesus; "He "welcomes" sinners and tax collectors!!" The Greek verb for "welcome" comes from the same root as the verb which means, "to bring into one's arms". Jesus was not merely offering some sort of routine, polite word of welcome to these sinners. He was drawing them close, Jesus was embracing sinners with a big ol' bear hug! *Thanks be to God that Jesus is still giving bear hugs to us sinners.*

It is the Pharisees who apply the term "sinner" to those with whom Jesus is close. The Pharisees applied the term "sinners" not only to any who had some moral failure, but to all who rejected their particular and stringent and legalistic version of Judaism.

In the first of two parables, Jesus tells us of a shepherd who is willing to leave the ninety-nine sheep alone in order to find the one who has been lost. This shepherd, a picture of God, keeps such a good eye on the sheep that he is instantly aware when even one is missing out of 100. And when the shepherd realizes this, he cares enough to do something about the one who is lost, and he goes out, after the one lost sheep. *In response to the 1% Lost, this shepherd is 100% Savior.* Not only does the shepherd miss the sheep and finds the sheep, when he finds it, he does not scold, intimidate, harm or scare the lost sheep into submission. And unlike the other 99 who had to walk home, the shepherd hoists the lost one onto his shoulders and carries it back home, rejoicing.

When missionaries to the Innuits first attempted to translate the Bible, they stumbled over the word *joy*. Presumably, in that bleak, icy Arctic, landscape, there was not much need for such a word, until someone pointed out the Innuits' dogs that were always full of joy at the end of a hard day of sledge pulling. And so it is that the sentence about the shepherd's joy of finding the lost sheep is translated, *'there will be more tail wagging in heaven over one sinner that repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance!'*

In relating this tale, Jesus exposes the poor attitude shown by the Pharisees. Being lost and found was what their faith was all about. Jesus knew this, heck, even the Pharisees knew that. So that we don't get too sentimental, we need to be very clear just all that is stake in this brief story. In the ancient world, to be lost means to be lost for good. The Semitic words for "lost" and "destroyed" are the same. A person without a flock or a shepherd, a person with no home, or tribe, or god could not survive. In the desert, in the wilderness, a person simply couldn't, a person didn't, make it on their own. On the flip side of the coin, to be found meant to be saved.

In this story, Jesus makes clear that the shepherd always risks everything for the one little lost lamb. The shepherd knows that when any of us are lost, we are goners. And it takes God and God alone to seek us out, to lift us up, to carry us to safety; across the Red Sea, across the desert, across whatever wilderness it is in which we have strayed or gotten lost. And isn't it obvious that in this image of the lost sheep the Pharisees and all who heard Jesus speak must have heard and echo of the Passover of their people in Egypt.

This is one of these vitally important Jesus stories and over the years I have reminded many, many people of this parable as a crystal clear picture of the graciousness of God's love and mercy. For years, I shared this story with every Confirmation Class I led, assuring those present that no matter where they ever find themselves, God is always on the way to them and for them, that the God we know in Jesus Christ is the God who always is coming to us and for us, seeking and searching and finding and saving, and carrying us rejoicing, able to bear all our burdens and our faults.

Jesus didn't offer the high and mighty Pharisees any direct response. But if he had, He may well have said, "*How can you, in light of our faith in the seeking, searching, saving, God, condemn me for eating dinner with a few lost souls?*"

To push His point, to extend and multiply this picture of the seeking, searching, saving God, Jesus tells another little story about a woman who had lost a coin. She swept the house looking for it. She found it and invited all her friends and neighbors for a party, at which the tails that were wagging were because of the dancing.

I was struck by the observations of J. Duncan Derrett, one-time Emeritus Professor of Oriental Laws at the University of London, on this little story. He pointed out that lost and found property was a huge issue for the Hebrew people and that they had developed an intricate system of laws governing lost property. In Jerusalem there was a centralized lost and found system. In the countryside, people relied on the rumor mill of friends and neighbors, as a bulletin board of lost things. It was a sort of ancient form of property and casualty insurance.

In the matter of lost money, because there would have been no way to know to whom it belonged, if one saw a coin on the ground, one did not pick it up. One left it where it was until the rightful owner found it. It was helpful that coins were not perfectly round and they were concave, like little misshapen dishes, so they were not likely to roll far from where they were dropped. So, for example, in the story Jesus told, the lost coin in question absolutely had to be in the house – *or almost absolutely.*

Within this little incident there is a hidden drama in the story that everyone hearing it for the first time would have understood. The women of the village would have been in and out of one another's homes all day long. And because a coin was not likely to have rolled out the door, anyone who had been in the house was a suspect of thievery until the coin was found. Any such thievery would have been a violation of religious law and a crime against not one person, *but against the entire community.* This helps explain the great sense of relief and celebration unleashed when the coin is found. All celebrated not only because the coin been found, but the entire community was now off the hook, the entire village was declared innocent, liberated, set free.

Q: Why did Jesus portray the tireless searcher as a woman?

A: A guy would stand in the center of the room and yell, "Honey, Have you seen my coin??"

I also would draw to your attention the comments of J. Ellsworth Kalas in his book, "Parables From the Back Side" arguing that the woman had not lost just one coin, but one coin of a set of ten. Women of that time saved ten such coins to put on a headband during their marriage ceremony. Once they collected 10, they had what they needed to be married "properly"! As such losing this one little coin jeopardized this woman's entire future.

These stories are of course not about a sheep or a coin. They are not about a woman or a shepherd. *They are about God. They are about us.*

By telling these stories, Jesus re-emphasizes that the accusation that He eats with sinners is no accusation at all. It is a fact; *Jesus eats with sinners.* This is a true statement and is in many ways the very heart of Jesus' ministry. To this day, Jesus continues to eat with sinners; *at this Table!*

To this day, Jesus wishes to embrace us with a big ol' bear hug! To this day Jesus welcomes sinners into the Kingdom of God, *sinners only need apply!* As ever Jesus is so very careful about the tales he tells. Here Jesus selects as models of the joy of God's reign two persons who were themselves outcasts: Shepherds and Women. Both examples of people whom the religious authorities deemed to be unworthy, on the edge, unseen or unwanted, the sort of people who found it difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill the demands of the Law as it was interpreted by those "special religious gurus" because of their gender or career path – as if any Judean shepherd had much choice over their career path!

Jesus paints a startlingly vivid picture of God, the irrational shepherd who abandons an entire flock to seek one poor lamb who doesn't know his left from his right. In the grace of God, one little lost lamb merits the shepherd's undivided attention.

Jesus gives us the challenging image of God in the poor woman who has lost her coin, one little coin, which means so much, that has somehow slipped through the cracks due to no fault of its own. In the grace of God that little coin merits the whole world's attention until it is found.

Whoever you are, wherever you are today...

Jesus assures you: *God is on the way, shepherd's crook or broom in hand.*

Jesus assures you: *however lost you might feel, however lost you are, God has dropped everything and will not rest until you are found.*

Jesus assures you: *you are noticed, you are missed, you matter and you belong.*

Jesus assures you: *not until all are found can any truly be at home.*

And so our Savior who welcomes us, who embraces us, who celebrates finding us, will continue to do the same for all, that there is a welcome for all of us. *Even 1% Lost discovers that Jesus is 100% Savior. Amen.*

---

### **1 Timothy 1:1-17**

1Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, 2To Timothy, my loyal child in the faith: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. 3I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any different doctrine, 4and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith. 5But the aim of such instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith. 6Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, 7desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions. 8Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. 9This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, 10fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching 11that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. 12I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, 13even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. 16But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. 17To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

**Luke 15:1-10**

1Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3So he told them this parable: 4"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep 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? 5When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. 8"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? 9When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 10Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

*The New Revised Standard Version*, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.