

**Luke 15:1-10**  
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**How Loved Are You?**      **June 18, 2017**  
Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore

The words, “Jesus loves me” could truthfully be stated by every human being on this planet. Think about that for a minute. Not everyone will understand those words the same way, or receive the news with gladness and open hearts, but that doesn’t mean the words aren’t true, for them or others.

Today we fully launch into our Sizzlin’ Summer Sermon Series for ’17- ‘For the Bible Tells Me So,’ with a scripture request from one of Jesus’ parables. This portion of scripture delivers the message that “Jesus Loves Me” as well as any passage of scripture you could ever choose.

I still remember the definition of a parable from my confirmation class from years ago and it still rings true as a bell today: Parables are ‘*earthly stories with a heavenly meaning*’.

This is a more profound saying than it sounds. Earthiness is straightforward enough. It’s the heavenly meaning that might be overwhelming for us to take in. The earthiness is obvious- something we can see or touch; the heavenly meaning holds a truth we may barely comprehend, but which we still know is true- down in the deepest part of ourselves, where we all so seldom go.

Jesus’ parables are all about how God works in this world - the mysterious, strange, odd way that God deals with us, and the parables in themselves are very strange things. Jesus is a genius of story-telling, and what you have to watch most of all with Jesus’ parables are the small twists, the little turns and the details you don’t at first see. I can have read a parable for thirty years, preached on it five times, and in the thirty-first year all of a sudden see something I never saw before; it’s been buried there all along.

One great help I’ve found is the work Robert Farrar Capon’, an Episcopal scholar & priest- who wrote wisely and voluminously on the parables. So we start with the parable of the lost sheep, in the 15th chapter of Luke’s Gospel, a chapter which hosts three parables about lostness: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son, the tale of the prodigal son.

Luke sets the scene by explaining that the tax collectors and sinners were gathering all around Jesus to hear him. Scribes and Pharisees (the authorities), grumbled about this. They complained and said, "This man welcomes sinners, eats with them, so he’s a bad person."

Now, obviously Jesus, in many people’s minds, was regarded as a perfect candidate to be the promised Messiah to fulfill God’s will for Israel and do all sorts of wonderful things in

the world. On the other hand, people like the scribes and Pharisees didn't think that Jesus was much of a Messiah candidate if he hung out with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus spent a lot of time welcoming these people, eating with them, visiting them, and otherwise consorting with them, so the authorities didn't like this. It's fitting of the remark: "This fellow eats with sinners and welcomes them!" that Jesus tells the parable of lostness.

"Imagine you have one hundred sheep," he says to those gathered around. "You have one hundred sheep and you lose one of them. Now, you would be sure to go out after the lost one until you found it, right?"

Well, what's the real answer to that question? The real answer to that question is "of course not."

Nobody in their right mind who's in the sheep business and has one hundred sheep, loses one, would leave the ninety-nine to the wolves and coyotes and go off chasing after just one.

You cut your losses, forget about the lost sheep, and go on with the ninety-nine. That's how business is done.

So Jesus' question is inane. It's odd. It's ironic. Who of us would do this? Who? No one would! No one would do this sort of thing.

And then he says, "And when you find it, what would you do with the sheep if you'd actually recovered it?" You would put the sheep on your shoulders, and then notice what Jesus says. He doesn't say, "... he goes back to the ninety-nine and gives this little sheep back to his mother sheep," or something like that. What Jesus says is that he puts the lost sheep on his shoulders and goes to his house. He goes home.

In this parable, Jesus never goes back to the ninety-nine sheep. The ninety-nine sheep are a set-up. Jesus has divided the flock into one sheep and ninety-nine sheep, and he's not trying to make two different groups. (You know, ninety-nine who don't get lost, and one who does.)

The real meaning of the one and the ninety-nine is that the one lost sheep is the whole human race as it really is. And the ninety-nine "found" sheep who never get lost are the whole human race as we *think* we are. So the ninety-nine; therefore, are not real, but are a rhetorical device, a way of setting up the story of the one lost sheep. And the one lost sheep stands for all of us, and what this really means is that the only thing the shepherd — God, the 'God' character of the story — is interested in, is going after the lost. That is the shepherd's purpose, to seek and find sinners. That's it.

And then Jesus announces, "I say to you that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

The proof of the truth of this is, of course, have you ever met any of these ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance? No, you haven't.

That's because there isn't one in the whole world. The only ones who are real are the lost, which includes all of us. The ninety-nine are a set-up, a way to set the scene for us to see **ourselves** in this bigger picture. Jesus is only concerned in finding the lost. God, in Christ, is only interested in finding the lost, which includes all of us.

So, again, the words "Jesus loves me" could be truthfully stated by every human being on this planet. Think about that for a minute. What a world it would be if we all knew- down deep, that we were equally loved, sought after and cherished by God. What a message that is to hear.... and we can hear it in more ways than one.

This is an especially good message to hear today, on Father's Day, for not everyone's Father has always been effusive with their praise, and its not only Dads who find themselves lost at one time or another, in one way or another...

I want to close with a story, not a parable. This is a plain old story- with an earthly meaning, that you can apply some heavenly truth to, if you like, about a couple of people. It's about a young woman who, when she was growing up, had an estranged relationship with her father. This story could be from my extended family, or maybe from yours. It goes like this: Her father was always on her case. Whatever she did, it wasn't good enough. He corrected her constantly. She found it so demoralizing that as soon as she could, she left the house and got an apartment.

Away from day-in, day-out living with her father, she eased off and was politely distant toward him - whenever she was forced to be with him.

One of those times she was forced to be with him was on her mother's birthday. When she went to her mother's birthday party she was immediately uncomfortable. As soon as she entered the house, the walls started to close in on her.

Her sister was there with her husband and their four-year-old son. They had just bought a dog, a puppy, for the little boy.

So she took her nephew and the dog and went out into the backyard. She took the leash off the dog, and the puppy ran all around.

Her mother came out on the porch and told them to come in for dinner and to bring the dog in, too. But when they tried to catch the dog, he thought it was a game, and he ran away, eluding their grasp every time.

Her father comes out in the yard, asks her for the leash, sits calmly on a bench, and tells her and her nephew not to run after the dog. They do not chase the dog, and the dog figures the game is over. He pads up to the father on the bench who clips the leash on his collar, just like that. The father turns to his daughter and grandson and says: “that’s how you do it.” This infuriates the young woman, of course. It is one more time she isn’t good enough.

After dinner and before the birthday cake, the woman decides once again that she’d like to get out of the house. She takes her nephew and the dog outside, only this time in front of the house. Before she can stop him, the nephew takes the leash off the dog. The dog is running out in the street, in between the parked cars. They chase the dog, but the puppy is too quick.

Frustrated, she tells her nephew to sit on the curb next to her and not to move.

After a while, the dog realizes the running game is over and pads his way toward the woman and her nephew. But the nephew jumps up and tries to grab the dog. The dog is off and running.

The woman scolds her nephew and tells him to sit still. Since the dog is not being chased- again-, he makes a return visit. The woman clips the leash on his collar, stands up, takes her nephew’s hand, and turns around.

There- in the front window of the house, is her father. He has been watching it all. He has a big grin on his face. The he flashes out an OK sign, forefinger & thumb together, pumping his arm in the air.

The young woman laughs and gives him an OK sign back.

I’m not sure who was more lost, or more loved— it’s sometimes hard to tell.

It seems to me that this young woman got her father back in the most serendipitous of ways. The set of events that occurred could not have been planned. But step by step of unforeseen grace was leading them to a place of shared joy... Both were surprisingly found in God’s ever generous love.

The love that was once lost was now found, in a very small, digestible nourishing amount. It was a place to start, the right place for the two of them.

Jesus’ love finds a way, doesn’t it—even when we least expect it, even when we don’t deserve it. Jesus loves us all.... ALL!

Thanks be to God. Amen.