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SERMON

The Lost are Found

Luke 15:1-10

September 11, 2016

Skyline Presbyterian Church

A man named Thor Heyerdahl wanted to test his theory that people from South America could have settled the Polynesian Islands in the South Pacific long before Columbus sailed to the New World. He took a small team of men to Peru, where they constructed a raft out of balsa logs tied together with rope much as a group of sailors might have done in earlier, less sophisticated times. Heyerdahl named the raft the Kon-Tiki. He and his crew of five set out on the Pacific from the Westcoast of Peru on April 28, 1947. They sailed the raft over 4,300 miles across the Pacific Ocean before smashing into a reef in Polynesia 101 days later. They had accomplished their goal and Heyerdahl wrote a best-selling book and produced a documentary film about their adventure. In 2012, it was made into a feature film titled, Kon-Tiki.

While the adventure was successful, it was not without difficulties. During the three-month journey, the crew of the Kon-Tiki had little control over the direction of the craft and no way to stop its forward progress. They learned early in the voyage that anything dropped overboard was almost impossible to recover once the raft had left it behind.

Two months into the voyage and thousands of miles from land, one of the men, a man named Herman Watzinger, lost his footing and fell overboard. The raft, driven by a strong wind in heavy seas, moved ahead faster than Herman could swim. The five remaining men were naturally horrified. They tried to throw Herman a life belt on a rope, but the wind blew it back at them. In seconds, Herman was all but lost to their sight in the mass of waves.

Suddenly one of the men, a man named Knut Haugland, grabbed the life belt and dove into the water. He swam back to Herman, wrapped the life belt around him, and held his exhausted friend and the rope while the men of the crew pulled them both back to the safety of the raft. All six of the men subsequently finished the journey unharmed.

I thought of Herman Watzinger thrashing helplessly in that mass of waves when I re-read this much loved passage in Luke's Gospel about the lost sheep and the lost coin.

Jesus told the crowd His parables: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them," He begins. "Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

While the crowd was digesting this pithy little story, Jesus told them another:

"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell

you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

It’s important to note the element of helplessness in these two parables. The lost sheep could not have found its way back into the shelter of the sheepfold. It was lost and helpless. Did we notice that the shepherd puts it on his shoulders and carries it home?

And the lost coin obviously could not find its way back onto the woman’s necklace or into her purse. Both the sheep and the coin were as helpless as Herman foundering in the waves of the Pacific, totally dependent on his friends on the Kon-Tiki.

We often get frustrated with people who have deep-seated problems, especially if they’ve needed our help before. “Why can’t they just help themselves?” we ask. “Why can’t they pull themselves up by their bootstraps?” as the old saying goes. But we cannot save ourselves. There is no self-help program that will open heaven’s portals. We cannot think our way to Jesus; we cannot work our way to Jesus; we cannot even clean up our act enough to get to Jesus. Salvation is a gift. Salvation is not something we can do for ourselves, but something that has been done in our behalf.

Jesus saw the dangers of people believing that they were among the spiritual elite and furthermore believing that they had achieved this status by their own doing. Such an attitude breeds pride. Jesus doesn’t need any smug, self-righteous followers looking down at the spiritually unwashed among them.

It’s like the story of Mildred, the self-appointed church gossip who kept sticking her nose in other members’ private lives. She made a mistake, however, when she spread the word that George, a new member, was an alcoholic after she saw his pickup truck parked in front of the town’s only bar one afternoon.

George, a man of few words, didn’t explain, defend, or deny; he said nothing.

He simply quietly drove over to Mildred’s house, parked his pickup in front of Mildred’s house...and left it there all night!

No, Jesus certainly doesn’t need smug, self-righteous followers looking down on others. We are all sinners saved by grace.

It’s important to also note the eagerness of the shepherd and the woman to find that which was lost. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep in the open country and goes after the lost sheep until he finds it and when he does, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.”

And the woman who has lost one of her ten silver coins lights a lamp, sweeps the house and searches carefully until she finds it. Then what does she do? She calls her friends and neighbors together and says, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.”

In both cases, Jesus says, in the same way, there is rejoicing in heaven whenever one sinner repents.

I remember watching a television news story about three hikers who were high up in the Cascade Mountains. One of the hikers went ahead of the others to scope out the trail. As he did so, a thick cloud bank rolled over the rugged peaks. Two hours later, the other two still couldn’t find him. They looked, they yelled, they searched and searched. Then they got scared. “He couldn’t have gone that far,” one of them said. “The terrain is pretty treacherous. He must have fallen. What do we do?!”

They did what any well-prepared hiker does in the twenty-first century. They pulled out their cell

phone, and called for help! And before too long, an emergency rescue helicopter was hovering at 6,000 feet overhead. And not too long after that, a helicopter from the news station was in the area, investigating the story. And just when they were going to call more people into the search . . . the third hiker turned up, out of nowhere, safe and sound. He had wandered off a wrong trail and gotten turned around. Eventually he ran into another group of hikers who pointed him the right way.

As I watched the story, I couldn't help thinking: "Wow, what a lot of energy and time and money invested just to look for one hiker." Then I thought, "Can we afford to do that every time somebody gets lost?" That was a logical question. However on further reflection I've decided that Jesus would probably disagree. It's not a logical question. It is the wrong question. Jesus wants to reclaim everyone who is lost. That is what the cross says to us. There is no length to which God will not go to rescue one solitary soul. And when that one lost person is found all of heaven rejoices.

It is our tendency to think of "lost" people as those who are much worse off than we are. But, Friend, we are that lost person if we have never opened ourselves fully to the love of Jesus Christ. We are the lost sheep, we are the lost coin, we are Herman struggling in the waves as the Kon-Tiki moves farther and farther away if we are still keeping Christ at arm's distance and have never opened ourselves fully to Him.

I am burdened that so many people are so casual about their faith. They've never made it central to their lives. And so, when the Gallup Group does their polls, they discover that church people have the same prejudices as the world outside; church people have the same problems as the world outside; church people have the same morals as the world outside. And so people outside the church rightfully ask, "Does their faith do nothing for them?"

And the truth of the matter is that for the casually committed, it really doesn't. Christian faith is an all or nothing proposition. If we want the peace, the joy, as well as the love of Jesus Christ, we must give Him our all.

There's an expression that perhaps young adults are familiar with especially those who are in romantic relationships. The expression is summed up in three letters D. T. R. Those letters stand for "Define the Relationship." It is a clarion call for relational clarity: Are we in this relationship for laughs, or are we in it for keeps? There comes a time in every relationship when you are either in or out.

That is also true of our relationship with Christ. It's somewhat like being married. Do we understand that there is no such thing as being a little bit married? Either you are in or you're out. In the same way, you can't be a little bit Christian.

In Jesus' day, being in relationship with Him inevitably involved some kind of spiritual D.T.R. No one went away from an encounter with Jesus saying, "That was a good talk." Jesus gently, but relentlessly, asked people to make a decision about their relationship with Him. The fundamental decision involved this invitation: "Follow Me. Come be with Me, and learn from Me how to be like Me."

I'm asking you today to do a little D.T.R. It is time for us to define the relationship we have with Jesus Christ.

When we have a new relationship with Christ, we have a new relationship with every other person on earth.

Jesus was telling these parables to a mixed crowd of people, the righteous folks and the very unrighteous folk together. Jesus wanted them to see that none of them had an exclusive claim on the

kingdom of God. We are all mess-ups saved by grace.

There is a wonderful story about a young man named Billy who was attending his first day in Junior High school. At an opening assembly there was an introduction of all the homeroom teachers. Ms. Smith was introduced first. She was an “easy” teacher, so the kids cheered as she was introduced. Mr. Brown was next and he also was met with thundering approval. But Mr. Johnson was known to be a very strict disciplinarian. The kids jeered most unkindly when his name was called. The pain was evident on his face.

This scene was devastating to young Billy. He was a sensitive kid and he could not believe how the other students were treating Mr. Johnson. Suddenly he stood up in the middle of the bleachers and shouted: “Shut up! That’s my dad!” Instantly, the jeering and the booing stopped.

After school, Billy went home. When he saw his true father, he began to cry. “Dad, I told a lie at school today,” Billy said. He told his dad about the incident and how he had said that Mr. Johnson was his father and how he had yelled at all the other kids to “shut up” and be nice to the man.

His dad said: “It’s all right, son. You just got the family members mixed up. Mr. Johnson’s not your father he’s your brother.”

I’ve spent most of this sermon trying to help us see that we are the lost sheep, the lost coin, and to feel gratitude for Jesus saving us. Now I want to offer one more thing I want us to see in these parables. Jesus wants us to become like Him. We are to become like the shepherd who looks for the sheep that doesn’t even know it is lost (or has wandered off again!) We are to be like the woman who searches and searches throughout her house until she has found that one lost coin. We are to be like Knut Haugland and dive into the storm to throw the life belt around one who is perishing in waves. We are to become part of Jesus’ Search and Rescue Team. The lost are found so that we can bring salvation to others.