



The Trinity Pulpit



True Value
Luke 15:1-3
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Gary Smalley, author of *Love Is a Decision* and numerous other books on relationships, helps us grasp the point of true value. For one particular television special, he borrowed a friend's Stradivarius violin to use as an illustration. His friend had the violin flown in - complete with its own "security guard"! During the seminar, while teaching on value and honor, Mr. Smalley held up the violin for the audience to observe, without revealing its true nature. It was old and scratched up, with no strings, so it didn't look particularly impressive. As he held it up, he noticed that the audience's response was minimal. He says, "My holding up the violin didn't produce even one 'ah-h-h-' gasp in the entire crowd. After all, they could see with their own eyes that it was an old violin." Then he began to explain that this was not just any old violin that he was holding. He told how there were only a few of them left in the world, and it was valued at \$65,000. He then showed the audience the tiny inscription that said "Stradivarius." He continued, "A spontaneous, collective, breath-catching 'ah-h-h-h' reflex rifled throughout the crowd. Just a few moments before, it was just an old violin, not worthy of any special honor, but by attaching that word 'Stradivarius' to it, it suddenly was given a high place of honor by everyone in the room."¹

What had changed about that old violin? Of course it was its creator that made it something of worth. It was the name of Stradivarius that changed everyone's opinion of its value. I want to speak to you for a few moments about

true value. I want to suggest to you that life and people have a different value when the name of Jesus is spoken into the relationship.

The story of the Lost Sheep is just one in a trilogy of parables that Jesus tells as a reminder of God's love and grace. Most of the time when we look at this parable we use it as the prelude to the parable of the prodigal son. This parable and the parable of the lost coin serve as the introduction of the crowning statement about a loving and forgiving father. However, I want to just focus on the parable of the lost sheep and discover what it has to say about what God values.



The setting of all three of our parables of grace is that Jesus is attracting the wrong kind of people, at least, that is the assessment of the religious people of Jesus' day. Luke states that the tax collectors and the sinners were all gathering to hear him. The Pharisees who were the religious leaders of Jesus' day muttered, talked under their breath, and almost rumored, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

The tax collector was considered a sinner and an undesirable because of his practice. He worked for Rome, which was the occupying nation, and he was also many times dishonest in his gathering of taxes. For in many cases the tax collector could keep for personal use whatever he could gather above what he must send to Rome. The word *sinner* represents a group of people who the

religious leaders deemed undesirable in their culture. They would have included the poor, the prostitute, the tax collector, the gentile and other irreligious types. It is important to note that these were the very people that were attracted to Jesus. There was something about Jesus that was different than other teachers and rabbis of his day. It was not that Jesus joined in their sin or condoned their sin. Yet, Jesus had the ability to welcome them into his life without the wall of judgment that these poor people received most of the time from others in their society.

Jesus was welcoming sinners and the religious leaders did not condone this; so to their response, Jesus tells what the trilogy of parables about a loving God is. His point in all three parables is to remind us of the importance of all people in the eyes of God. Jesus would say “There is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that repents than 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

What can we determine that God values from this story of the lost sheep? Jesus tells us that a shepherd had 100 sheep and one went astray. The shepherd left the 99 and went in search of the one. The shepherd searches for the one lost sheep until he finds it and then he joyfully brings it back home. Once he arrives home, he cannot hold his rejoicing to himself and invites his friends and neighbors to join him in his rejoicing over the homecoming of one sheep.

Let me share with you four things I believe God values. First, God values that which is overlooked in our world. Those who were gathering with Jesus were the overlooked of Jesus’ culture. They were of no importance. They had little power, and the power that they did exert, such as the tax collector, was viewed with contempt. These were the people of Jesus’ day who were dismissed as of no importance. These are those who no one looked in the eye when they passed by. They are those who were on the outside looking in when it came to power, acceptance and significance. By the way, they included most of us in Jesus’ day: as a gentile we, too, would have been on the outside looking in. We were the forgotten ones.

Yet, Jesus tells us that when this one sheep is lost it is not overlooked. It is not dismissed as unimpor-

tant. The one sheep is considered of great value and must be found. There are many things in our world that are overlooked by us and yet of value to Jesus. There are people – so many people that are overlooked in our culture; yet, each one is of importance to God.

It does seem that we have lost the value of life in our nation. Not that we are the first to do so. Throughout the ages, nations and empires have lost the value of human life. We hear the sad stories of abandoned children who are discarded by parents. Not only on the front end of life but at the end of life there are some disturbing trends. There is a trend in many parts of our nation to no longer have funerals. When someone dies the family simply calls the funeral home and the funeral home takes care of the body and that is it. It is a sad commentary on our culture’s view of death and of life. A story was recently told by a person who was visiting a crematory and noticed that there were several stacks of urns in the corner. The person asked the attendant about those urns, thinking to himself that they must be empty. The mortician made a sad comment “I am sad to say those are the remains of people whose family did not return to claim them.”

People are overlooked in our culture but not in the kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God even the one is of great importance. The one is worth rejoicing over. Who are you overlooking? Who do you ignore at the office, in the hallway at school, in the hall of the church? Is not everyone of worth? They are in the kingdom of God.

Secondly, God values the one who is missing. I don’t know who counted the sheep in this parable, but the shepherd who did had to be very attentive to notice one sheep out of 100 missing. Counting sheep is like herding cats, it is hard to do.

Before there were DVDs in cars, iPods, and movies on phones for cross country trips, families actually had to do one of two things when they were on a long trip. They either had to talk to each other or they had to invent some kind of game to pass the time. My family would play either the Volkswagen game known as punch buggy, which is making a comeback due to a recent commercial, or the cow game. Now the cow game had to do with counting cows. As you traveled down the interstate you

took one side and someone else took the other side and when you would see cows on your side you counted them. If you came to a cemetery on your side of the road you had to bury your cows and start again. Whoever had the most cows at the end of the trip would win. I don't know about you, but counting cows in an open field was hard to do at 65 miles per hour.

I imagine that counting sheep would be the same. Who notices one is missing? How long would it take you to know that one out of 100 has gone astray? The indication from Jesus is that this shepherd was well aware, at every moment, of the whereabouts of his sheep. When one is missing it is noticed. I think God values those who are missing. Is that not what the gospel is about? Did Jesus not come to seek and to save those who were lost? Jesus came to include us all in the grace of God. He came to find those who were missing.

Are we noticing those who are missing? Not only those who have never come to Christ but also those who have come and then have fallen away. There are those who are missing. In the past few weeks we have tragically again seen the search for young girls who were missing. Sadly, these searches ended tragically. I am always amazed to see the news footage of family, friends, neighbors and strangers out in the weeds and countryside spread out and searching every place they can imagine for those who are missing. When I see those images, I think about those who are spiritually missing. Oh, that we would search with such intent for those who are missing spiritually from God's family.

This parable reminds us of the importance of the one who is missing. The one who is missing is worth our attention and our searching. The rabbis of Jesus' day taught that God would welcome repentant sinners, but Jesus gives us a picture of a searching God who is looking for those who are yet repentant. The two phrases of our text ring out this truth. This shepherd goes after and searches until the sheep is found. Those two lines teach us about God's persistence, determination, longsuffering and patience. God values those who are missing and we must too.

God values extravagant love. Who goes searching

for 1 when there are still 99? It does not make economic sense. It does not make common sense. Most would cut their losses and be happy to return with 99. Jesus does not tell us about the 99. We can assume that somehow they are safe but that is not Jesus' point. His point is that God does the unexpected out of love. God does the unimaginable when it comes to God's love.

One writer puts it this way:

There are a ton of things that happen only in the movies, and they should never be confused with real life. The Nostalgia Central Web site lists 40 of them, including:

- It is always possible to find a parking spot directly outside or opposite the building you are visiting.
- The Eiffel Tower can be seen from any window of any building in Paris.
- Plain or even ugly girls can become movie-star-pretty simply by removing their glasses and rearranging their hair.
- Anyone can land a 747 as long as there is someone in the control tower to talk you down.

It is also true that when you start dancing in the street everyone joins you.

There are also things that only happen in the gospel. A shepherd goes after one and leaves 99, and a woman throws a party when she finds one small coin. Who does that? Only in the gospel does it happen. That is, only in the Kingdom of God do we experience such extravagant love.

God also values joy. That might sound odd to some of us, but the truth is, the Bible is filled with moments of joy and Jesus' life is one filled with joy. God values moments of joy. Jesus himself is found at the party in many instances. Whether it is at the wedding feast of a young couple in Galilee or at Zacheaus' house with the other sinners in town, or in the home of friends like Martha, Mary and Lazarus, or even in a banquet given by a religious leader in Jesus' honor. Jesus is not a stranger to the party and to the pure joy that comes with celebra-

tion of moments of life.

Ernest T. Campbell asks the question, "Who would you rather go with on a week fishing trip? Jesus or John the Baptist? Whose sandwiches would you rather eat? John the Baptist's honey-locust on Wonder Bread, or Jesus' perch on pumpernickel? It has been said that if we deleted all the parties from the Book of Luke," Campbell offers, "it would be a paper-thin book."

In the three parables here in Luke 15 the end of the story is a party. Everyone is invited to come and rejoice. The shepherd calls everyone to join him in rejoicing at finding the one lost sheep. The woman invites her neighbors to rejoice with her when she finds her coin. The father throws a party for the son who was lost and is found and pleads with his elder son for him to join in the rejoicing. These are all stories of an invitation to rejoice.

It is sad to say that the image of the Christian in our culture today is not an image of joy – it is almost everything but. Most Americans think of Christians as judgmental, political and mean spirited. Rarely, if ever, are we described as people of joy. Yet, Jesus says "I have come to make your joy complete." The Apostle Paul would write "Rejoice and again, I say, rejoice." Maybe we have forgotten what we have to rejoice over.

Is not this parable about bringing us again to a place of rejoicing? In the Kingdom of God those who are overlooked are noticed...rejoice! In the Kingdom of God those who are missing and lost are found...rejoice! In the Kingdom of God there is the unexpected love of God. It is an extravagant love...rejoice!

One of my favorite Christian Songs is the song *Favorite Song of All* by Phillips Craig and Dean. Listen to the words:

*He loves to hear the wind sing
As it whistles through the pines on mountain hills
And He loves to hear the raindrops
As they splash to the ground in a magic melody
He smiles in sweet approval
As the waves crash to the rocks in harmony
Creation joins in unity
To sing to Him majestic symphonies,*

*And He loves to hear the angels
As they sing "Holy, Holy is the Lamb"
Heaven's choirs in harmony
Lift up praises to the Great I Am
But He lifts His hands for silence
When the wicked, saved by grace, begin to sing
And a million angels listen
As the newborn soul sings, "I've been re-
deemed!"*

*Chorus
His favorite song of all
Is the song of the redeemed
When lost sinners now made clean
Lift their voices loud and strong
When those purchased by His blood
Lift to Him a song of love
There's nothing more He'd rather hear
Nor so pleasing to His ear
As His favorite song of all*

*But He lifts His hands for silence
When the wicked, saved by grace, begin to sing
And a million angels listen
As the newborn soul sings, "I've been re-
deemed!"*

That is the song of the overlooked being noticed, the missing being found, extravagant love and joy...that is the value of the Kingdom of God. ❖

¹Max Davis, *Never Stick Your Tongue out At Mama* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1997), 119.

