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Luke 15:1-10
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A Time to Search and to Give Up

There is a reality TV show I stumbled upon recently called *Filthy Fortunes*. Have you seen it? The show follows a team of estate hunters who take on homes that are extremely cluttered, sometimes to the point of hoarding. They painstakingly sort through everything, looking for hidden treasures among the piles of stuff.

Sometimes they find rare things, gold and silver coins, valuable collectibles, watches, artwork, and other unexpected treasures. It's amazing what they uncover. On this show, one person's trash truly becomes another person's treasure.

What intrigues me most, though, is the hunt. They carefully turn over every item, searching until they find something of value.

In one episode, a man went through stacks and stacks of books, only to discover that several of them had been hollowed out and filled with cash. Thousands of dollars! You can imagine the excitement.

But sometimes they hear rumors about something valuable, like a box of expensive Rolex watches, and search everywhere, only to come up empty-handed. Eventually, they have to admit that what they were looking for simply isn't there. They have to give up the search.

The Wisdom Teacher of Ecclesiastes tells us, "There is a time to search and a time to give up."

So what does that mean? When do we keep searching, and when do we finally let go?

To explore that question, we're going to turn to two of Jesus' parables: the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin.

First, we need to know a little about the audience Jesus was addressing. He was teaching a crowd that included tax collectors, sinners, and religious leaders known as Pharisees. The tax collectors and sinners were drawn to Jesus, but the Pharisees and scribes weren't particularly happy about it. They were grumbling because Jesus welcomed these sinners and even sat down to eat with them. In their minds, Jesus was associating with the wrong crowd.

So join me as we read from Luke 15:1–10.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. **2** And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

3 So 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? **5** And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. **6** And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.' **7** Just 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? **9** And when 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.' **10** Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

As I worked on this sermon, my heart was pretty heavy over the sudden death of a friend of mine that you might have read about through the prayer chain this week. So, in many ways, this sermon is just as much geared for my own heart as it is yours.

What does it mean that there is a time to search and a time to give up?

The Hebrew word for search is *baqash*. It means to seek, search, request, or desire. It carries the sense of pursuing something with your whole heart. Giving it everything you've got.

The Hebrew word for give up is *abad*. It can mean to lose, destroy, or let perish. It gives us a sense of reaching the end of our efforts, when we've spent everything we've got on the search and still haven't found what we're looking for. Perhaps it's when we've tried every possible treatment, and the cancer continues to spread. Or when we've exhausted every resource and finally have to acknowledge that we cannot change the outcome.

This reminds me of the words of the prophet Jeremiah, written to God's people who were living in Babylonian exile. He said:

"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all of your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and will bring you back from captivity."[1]

Jeremiah uses that same Hebrew word for search: *baqash*.

In this context, the people were desperate for God to rescue them from exile, bring them home, and restore what had been lost. And God encouraged them not to give up hope, but to keep seeking him with all their hearts.

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[1] Jeremiah 29:13-14

Which brings us to the parables in our Scripture today. There are actually three stories in this section, each dealing with something precious that has been lost: a sheep, a coin, and a child.

We're going to spend our time this morning with the first two.

Notice that Luke begins by telling us exactly who was listening to Jesus. There were the tax collectors and sinners. These were the people everyone knew were lost. We might call them the *overtly lost ones*.

And then there were the Pharisees and scribes or teachers of the law. They were so busy pointing out everyone else's shortcomings that they couldn't recognize their own need for God's grace. We might call them the *covertly lost ones*.

The interesting thing is that Jesus tells these stories to both groups.

In other words, Jesus is strangely inclusive. He's speaking to all of us. Because whether we recognize it or not, we all have a tendency to wander away from God.

Jesus begins with the story of the lost sheep.

The Greek word translated as "lost" is *apollymi*. It can mean to destroy, perish, or lose. It suggests something that has gone astray and is in danger.

The Greek word for seek is *zeteo*. It means to search, desire, or strive after something. It is the kind of searching that requires energy, effort, and commitment.

Jesus asks, "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?"

It's a question that assumes an answer. Well, of course! You go after the lost sheep.

But there's one word here that I don't want us to gloss over.

UNTIL.

The shepherd keeps searching until he finds what is lost.

The Greek word for find is *heurisko*. It means to find, discover, or recover something that was lost. And that's exactly what the shepherd does. He doesn't stop UNTIL that sheep is safely back with him.

There's a song we sang earlier called *Reckless Love*. The chorus goes something like this:

"Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God
Oh, it chases me down, fights 'til I'm found, leaves the 99
I couldn't earn it, and I don't deserve it, still, You give Yourself away
Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God."

That's the picture scripture gives us of our Good Shepherd. Jesus pursues us. He doesn't give up on us. He recklessly leaves the ninety nine alone in the open country to fend for themselves. He spends everything he has, even his very life, to make sure that our sinfulness and waywardness never separate us from the love of God.

And notice what happens when the shepherd finally finds his sheep. He doesn't scold it or punish it for wandering away. He lovingly puts it on his shoulders and carries it home. He's so full of joy that he calls his friends and neighbors together to celebrate.

Then Jesus gives us a glimpse of what happens in heaven. There is more rejoicing over one lost person who repents than over ninety-nine do gooders who think they don't need to repent.

What a beautiful picture of God's amazing grace!

Jesus also tells a second story, this time about a woman who loses one of her ten silver coins. Implicitly we know that this is a drachma, about a single day's wages. Now to us that may not be that much, but to this woman perhaps on a fixed income, it was a lot.

Unlike the sheep, the coin has no will of its own. It hasn't wandered away. It hasn't made a bad decision. It is simply lost. Perhaps the woman misplaced it, or perhaps someone took it.

But notice how determined she is to find it.

She lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully UNTIL she finds it. There is that word until again.

The Greek word for sweeping is *saroo*. It means to clean thoroughly by sweeping. You know, like when you've lost your keys and you start tearing the couch cushions off, looking under everything, and maybe even turning the whole couch upside down. That's *saroo*!

And once again, the word for search is *zeteo*, the same word Jesus used to describe the shepherd's search for the sheep.

Do you ever wonder why I spend so much effort teaching you the Greek and Hebrew words? I certainly don't expect us all to become Greek and Hebrew scholars. But what I find is that there is more meaning to words than we see in any one translation. Changing the words out can completely change the meaning of the text. So it requires us to approach the text with a bit of humility.

The woman searches carefully for the coin until she finds it. She doesn't give up UNTIL that coin is back in her possession.

Why?

Because that coin is valuable to her.

And that's the point Jesus is making. What is lost is still precious. Its value hasn't changed simply because it is no longer where it belongs.

That's how God sees us.

Whether we've wandered away like the sheep or somehow become lost along the way like the coin, God doesn't stop loving us. God doesn't stop seeking us.

There is another story in Luke's Gospel about Jesus and a lost person named Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector, a much-hated man because of the way he cheated his fellow Jews out of their hard-earned money. Luke tells us he was a short man who wanted to see Jesus when he came into town, so he climbed up a sycamore tree.

Jesus spotted him and said, "Zacchaeus, come down. I need to eat at your house today."

And once again, the religious do-gooders began grumbling. "There he goes again! Jesus has gone to eat at the house of a sinner."

But notice what happens when Zacchaeus encounters Jesus. His life changes. He repents of his dishonest ways and offers to return what he had taken, and even more.

Jesus responds: "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, [like all of you], is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."[2]

There are those words again. *Zeteo*, to seek, search, desire, or strive after.

And the word for save is *sozo*. It means to rescue, deliver, heal, and preserve.

That's what Jesus does. He comes to rescue us, restore us, and bring us back into the fold of God. And if that's what Jesus does for us, then surely it should shape how we treat others.

My friends, we are called to care about people who are lost because lost people just as valuable in God's kingdom as we are. We are called to extend the same grace, patience, and love that Jesus has extended to us.

So let me ask you: Who do you think is beyond the reach of God's love? Who comes to mind when you think about someone who seems too far gone, too difficult, or too unwilling to change? What if that's who the Holy Spirit is calling us to pursue like the way Jesus pursued us.

In our fast-moving culture, building relationships takes time and energy. In Young Life terms, it may take years and earning the right to be heard. Like the treasure hunters in Filthy Fortunes, sometimes we can forget to see the treasure in other people. But Jesus reminds us that every person is precious and matters to God.

And all of heaven rejoices when someone who was lost is found.

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[2] Luke 19:1-10

So we sing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!”

But what about the other side of the Ecclesiastes coin?

“There is a time to search and a time to give up.”

We've spent a good deal of time talking about God's relentless pursuit of us and our calling to love others in the same way. But are there times when we need to stop searching? When we need to acknowledge that we've done everything we can and need to leave the outcome in God's hands?

I believe there are. There comes a time in everyone's life when we have to face the reality that, despite all our efforts, or all of our good intentions, things may not turn out the way we had hoped.

Maybe we've applied for job after job, but the opportunities never come.

Maybe we've tried everything we can to save a marriage, but reconciliation just isn’t enough.

Maybe we've reached out repeatedly to an estranged family member, hoping to repair the relationship, but nothing seems to change.

Maybe we've pursued every available medical treatment, only to discover that the cancer has returned, more aggressively than before.

What do we do then?

Perhaps God is saying to us:

“Be still. Stop trying so hard to control the outcome. But rest in my love. Trust that I am God.”[3]

Stop. Rest. And trust.

Sometimes giving up doesn't mean giving up on God or giving up on hope. It means recognizing the limits of what we can do and placing what we cannot control into God's hands. We can love someone without being able to fix them. We can pray for healing without being able to guarantee it. We can work toward reconciliation without being able to make another person respond.

And sometimes the most faithful thing we can do is surrender the outcome to God.

This week, I've had to do this as I've wrestled with the death of my friend.

When someone takes their life, it leaves behind so many unanswered questions and unsettled emotions. What follows is a kind of grief that is difficult to put into words. We always wonder what we missed, what we could have done differently, and whether there was something more we could have said or done.

We search for answers, but there simply aren't any.

My hope and comfort rest in the belief that, deep in his heart, my friend knew the love of God and Jesus as his Good Shepherd. The only thing I could settle on

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[3] Psalm 46:10

was that his mental illness clouded his judgement and led him to believe there was no other way out of his despair.

We will never fully understand what happened or why. But the Gospel tells us that even in the deepest places of despair, Jesus is present. His love does not abandon us, even when we cannot see a way forward.

I also take comfort in the words of the Apostle Paul who said, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus."[4]

Nothing. Not even death. Nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. And that includes suicide.

So while we mourn and deal with the pain and unanswered questions, I trust that my friend is safe in the arms of our Good Shepherd. The same Shepherd who searches for the lost, carries them home, and rejoices when they are found.

Friends, there is indeed a time to search and a time to give up. There is a time to keep pursuing, praying, loving, and reaching out. And there is a time to recognize that we have done all we can and place the rest in God's hands. The good news is that even when we have to stop searching, God never stops loving.

So may the Holy Spirit give us the wisdom to know the difference. May we always remember that we are loved by a Good Shepherd who never ever gives up on us. And may we stop, rest, and trust when our searching comes to an end.

Amen.

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[4] Romans 8:38-38