

## Lost and Found – Just Jesus Stories

1. Our text today is Luke 15. There are three stories in this one chapter – two quite short and one a bit longer. In the chapter just before this one, he'd had dinner at the house of a prominent Pharisee and he'd warned people about the cost of following him (who builds a tower or goes out to war before assessing the costs?).
2. We generally get the first two stories right – though I've rarely seen their lessons put into practice – but we completely blow the longer, better known story. The reason? We divorce these stories – and especially the last one – from their context and we fail to see that they hang on the opening of the chapter. (Luke 15:1,2)
3. Remember that, in the first century and in much of that part of the world today, you are who you eat with. That rule governed social position, obligation, and could reform and reset a community in a heartbeat. And here came Jesus who knew Leviticus and Deuteronomy and the codes of cleanliness and holiness better than any man or woman who had lived before or who would live after him and...he welcomed sinners and ate with them.
4. Note what is not in the passage; no long description of how they were called to repentance, went through a period of mortification and probation, and then allowed back into fellowship. Have a look at these.
5. Luke 15:3-7. Okay, there isn't really much earth-shattering here. A sheep wanders away from the flock. The shepherd notices that and goes in search of the sheep. The shepherd brings the sheep back and there is much rejoicing. That said, I would mention a couple of things:
  - a. The shepherd noticed the sheep. He valued the sheep enough to go in search of it. He brought it back.
  - b. It is reasonable that all the attention is given to the found sheep. The rest of the sheep were not upset that it wasn't all about their needs.
  - c. Churches that are designed to meet the needs of the safe sheep aren't really the model here. It is more a search and

rescue movement that includes a huge amount of loving community as well.

6. Second story is much the same. Luke 15:8-10. Once again, that which was lost is searched for, this time with a light and a broom. It is brought into the community and there is much rejoicing.
7. Then, the third story...but something odd happens here, not in the stories, but in the way we treat them. We have a lost sheep, a lost coin and then a prodigal son. If you aren't a church person, you probably don't use the word "prodigal." It means "wasteful and irresponsible."
8. The bones of the story are well known. The younger son asks his father for his share of the inheritance. Technically, that was allowed. He then leaves his community and spends it all, wastes it in the worst possible way. Then, he hits true bottom, working for a man who raises pigs. The young man is so hungry he wishes he could eat the slop the pigs are eating. Get the picture? Good.
9. But that's not the picture Jesus wants you to get! Watch carefully what happens here: the young man comes to himself. He comes to his senses. He composes an honest and real speech asking for forgiveness. I think those of us who have gone sideways into the rails and over them a time or two can relate to this; we tend to practice our speech.
10. He heads back to his father's house to give his speech – asking only to be allowed to work on the family farm as a servant, but God interrupts the story. The father sees him while he is still a long way away. Experts in Greek tell me that the word used here indicates that the father was straining to see at the horizon, as if on his toes, looking for his son.
11. When the son is seen, the father runs to him. Note how different this is from the way the pharisees and teachers of the law reacted to sinners. Our God runs. When the young man tries to repent, the father interrupts him. He never gets to finish. He is immediately restored and forgiven and there is great rejoicing...

12. ...except from the older brother. That would be the good church people who are not happy that God is running to all these awful people who don't come up to their standards.
13. This would have been the perfect time for Jesus to fall on them like a ton of bricks, but he did not. He has the father telling the older son that he is loved and that God will supply for him anything he wants whenever he wants it. God's grace given to sinners is NOT BAD NEWS to the rest of us but very good news! If THEY get grace...

We just celebrated Advent. Now, we start the long, slow march toward Pentecost and Easter. As the seasons change and as our calendars flip pages, the love of God is constant, His presence is constant, and His grace is there for us...and for the ones we don't think deserve it.

For the stories are not about lost sheep and coins but about the value the master puts on each one of those sheep and coins. And it isn't about a prodigal son but, rather, about the loving father. A God who runs.