

## Defining Moment: Recognizing our Worth by Pastor Jenn

### Gospel Reading Luke 15:1-10

This past week my parents made reservations for our next family vacation to the beach and when my mother told me I just happened to be near the Dollar Tree and I decided to go in there to see what I could get for the trip already. And my did I find some neat things! I found this sand pail and guess how much? \$1.25! I found this football for the beach and I found these sunglasses- guess how much? And this fan- perfect for when I read on the beach. But that's not all- I found this new toothbrush, so I don't have to take mine- look it's electric- and guess how much? And of course, this carabiner for my keys and wallet to take to Funland- and guess how much? No 2 for \$1.25! isn't that awesome???? It's a great store for trip preparations. But it's also a great place to recognize the value of a dollar. It certainly comes in various forms, shapes, and sizes. The store is a reminder of a dollar's worth.

Where do we go to remember the value of ourselves? Our worth? We could turn to our banks, but is our worth just about how much or how little money we have in those accounts? No, we are worth more than dollars, we are worth more than money. We each have a value. Each of us is valuable in our own way. And Jesus reminds us of that in this passage.

Now if you were paying close attention to the beginning of the text, you heard that Jesus had quite the audience that day. There were tax collectors and sinners, as well as Pharisees, reinforcers of Jewish law, and scribes, interpreters of the Scripture and law. Notice the tax collectors were categorized with the sinners because they were not exactly favored by anyone. We've talked about this before, but let me remind you, tax collectors at this time were private citizens who were under contract with the Roman authorities to collect money from citizens. In order to get that position, they had to pay the taxes to Rome beforehand. Which then means, when they taxed, they were allowed to tax whatever they wanted, to make a profit. And most charged a lot, making it unbearable for the average citizen. As you can imagine, they weren't liked by many. They were seen as conniving and bad. And often they were looped with the general term "sinners" people who seemed furthest away from God. *Interestingly enough, it is these sinners that God seeks to find.*

Jesus shares two parables to get that message across. He uses the examples of a shepherd and a woman, both, who in the eyes of the Pharisees and the scribes would have been deemed less than acceptable if not outwardly offensive, because they too were common, well beneath the religious leaders. But here Jesus uses them as representation of God.

The first parable tells of a shepherd who loses a sheep. And as Jesus shares this parable, he focuses not on the 99 sheep who stayed with their shepherd, rather he centered in on the one who had gone astray. The reason being, the other 99 are safe, the one lost sheep is not. And so the shepherd leaves the flock to find the sheep before it suffered any harm.

The other parable has a woman who loses a coin. And like the shepherd, she searched for the coin until she found it. Now her search was not about the welfare of the coin, but rather just seeking what was lost.

Both times Jesus asks the listeners of these stories, "Which one of you would do the same?" He is asking the Pharisees and the scribes; would they do the same? More than likely, they would not. Honestly, would we have done the same? It is pretty easy for us to focus on the whole rather than parts. Because sometimes we don't want to get bogged down with the details or separate parts, as they seem insignificant. To chase after one sheep with the risk of losing more. Or to even search for a penny seems crazy to us.

But here's the message, the Pharisees and scribes had that problem. If one individual could possibly affect the whole, they would ban that individual, not help him or her to become part of the whole. Which is why they eventually push for the arrest and conviction of Jesus. He was one who was disturbing the whole people, and in essence jeopardizing what they knew of in regard to their faith.

Yet Jesus came not to abolish their faith, or their law, in fact in Matthew 5:17 Jesus tells us he came to fulfill the law, the law of putting God first, loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, because that's how much God loves us too. You see in these parables Jesus is saying that each individual sheep, each individual coin is valuable and worth seeking out, to find. And as he says that he is telling the sinners and the tax collectors, each one of them is valuable to God and worth seeking out, to be found by God and God's love and grace for us. Not a bad message to hear, is it? We are each so valuable, that God will do whatever God needs to, to find us.

Which leads to something else we need to pick up on in this text, notice that Jesus makes no judgment about the reason for the "lostness" of the sheep or the coin. They just get lost. There are times when we get lost, not because we really want to sin or we are bad people, things happen, we get lost and separated from others, from God, even from God's blessings. Which is why for me, the best definition of sin is, "that which separates us from God" *"There are lots of things that are at work in this world to do that. There is evil, that force that is working against God's goodness. There is pain and suffering, which can drive us away from God if we lose sight of God's healing balm working in our lives. And there are things that you and I choose to do, that end up separating us from our faith and our God. We allow worries to get in the way of our faith, or anger, or other emotions that keep us distant from God. And before you know it, we begin to lose the goodness and hope of this faith. We get lost.*

However, may we hear the good news of this message today, and that is, no matter how lost you may get, God will always come looking for you. And God will not give up until you are found. Then when that happens, when you are found, God will celebrate your value. Jesus says that after the shepherd brings home the lost sheep the shepherd *"calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'*" And then when the woman found the coin Jesus says, *"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'*" Jesus ends by saying, *"Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents"*

This whole text is about Jesus being ridiculed by the Pharisees and scribes for who was coming to hang out with him, the tax collectors and sinners. The same people the Pharisees and scribes would not be caught dead welcoming into their presence or temples. And yet in response to that criticism Jesus is saying, he, like the shepherd cares about everyone and welcomes everyone and wants everyone to feel welcomed by him, because as they do, they feel welcomed by God. Jesus is thrilled that the tax collectors and sinners were coming to hear him and be with him. Because that means Jesus has done his job, he has brought them back into the fold of God and when they come back, they know their value. Through Jesus, God seeks us, God searches for us, God will find us and restore our relationship with God because as Jesus says, each one of us is of great value to God. It does not matter our social status. It does not matter our age, our gender, our size, none of that matters. What matters is knowing that to God, we are important. To God YOU are of great value. And nothing, absolutely nothing will prevent God from seeking you out so you may know your worth.