

*Britt Carlson*  
September 11, 2016

11 o'clock am

*The Community Church of Issaquah*  
Issaquah, Washington

## ***"The Lost and Found"***

Luke 15:1-10

What do you most treasure?

Is it your childhood photo albums? Maybe it's your collection of autographed baseballs. Maybe it's the jewelry your husband gave you over your sixty years of marriage before he passed away.

If one of those treasured things went missing, if suddenly you glanced over and saw that the Ken Griffey Jr. ball was not in its usual place or that there was an empty space on the shelf where that album usually was, what would you be doing the rest of the day?

The rest of the day you'd be on your knees looking under the bed. You'd be standing on chairs trying to peer on top shelves. You'd be calling your sister and your son and your neighbor asking where they each had seen it last. You would be praying and searching and praying some more. God, please, please, please let the lost be found.

If that's what we would do to find a possession, how much more would God do to find a person?

God isn't searching for lost baseballs or photo albums as special as those are. God is searching for you.

Recently, I got a picture of God's heart for us humans when I was watching my new favorite TV show, "Escaping Polygamy." "Escaping Polygamy" is a real-life docuseries about girls who grew up in a polygamous cult in Utah, escaped the cult in their teens and are now helping other people escape.

There's one episode that just gets me as a big sister.

A woman comes to the girls asking for help. She had escaped polygamy a year earlier but her little sister—the one she was closest with—is still inside. She doesn't know exactly where her sister is because the cult's compounds are so scattered and isolated, but she thinks her sister might be in Pringle, South Dakota.

Pringle, South Dakota is about as remote as they come. No cellphone service. A six-hour drive from the closest town you've ever heard of. But when it's your *sister* in an unsafe situation, when it's your *sister* who is lost to you, you don't care. You leave everything else behind, and you go to Pringle, South Dakota.

So the girls and this woman travel all the way out to Pringle. They finally get near the compound. They can't go close because there's a 24-hour watchtower and barbed wire and cameras. But the woman decides to hike in through the woods and see if she can't spot her sister during her sister's chores. After hiding in the bushes for hours, she sees her sister. Ultimately, she can't go to her sister. Her sister was accompanied, and it was too risky. I thought she would be so downcast and sad but she had broken out into a big smile because she at least got to see her sister. She finally knew where she was.

God is like that woman seeking her lost sister. What God has lost is as precious to him as that sister is to that woman because what God has lost is *daughters and sons*.

You know after I watched that show, I turned to my own sister, Siri and said, "Siri, if that was you I'd do everything I could like that woman to come get you." And honestly, it's true.

But after I've thought about it awhile, while I'd like to imagine myself the big-sister rescuer, I'm more often than not the little-sister lost sheep. And the reality is, we all are. We are all like that young woman's sister.

We are lost. We might not be lost in Pringle, South Dakota. More often we're lost in the thicket of greed or envy or unforgiveness or anger or bitterness. We don't exactly know how we wandered into this place in our lives, and we're not sure if we can leave. We feel trapped. There's a lot of open air around us and we might look like we're free but we're actually not free at all. We're lost sheep who suddenly look around them and nothing looks familiar.

You know, what do sheep do when they get scared? You'd think that they'd bleat out alerting people to where they are and asking to be found. But sheep don't often do that.

They'll often out of fear "curl up and lie down in the wild brush, hiding from predators."<sup>1</sup>

Wow. Isn't that what we do? We wander into lonely, isolated places and then we hunker down and self-protect, unable to reach out for help. We are prickly with our closest friends and drive them away. We become depressed and retreat into our bedrooms. We struggle at work and snap when anyone offers to help. We are lost—and we don't know how to become found.

We are lost sheep. But this is the good news. God doesn't wait for lost sheep to bleat. God doesn't wait for his sons and daughters to take a healthy self-inventory and get out their compasses and work their way back to the Lord. God the shepherd, Jesus says, goes out to the sheep. God leaves everything else behind and goes to rescue what can't rescue itself. God goes into the dark, isolated places, the wilderness places of our lives and seeks for us there, unwilling that even one of us sleep unprotected in the cold night.

---

<sup>1</sup> Helen Montgomery Debevoise, *Feasting on the Word: Year C Volume 4*, "Pastoral Perspective." 70.

Our shepherd is the one who comes for us while we are still lost sinners, hunkered down in the forest of fear and isolation.

The shepherd and the lost sheep aren't the only characters in this parable, though. Remember: there are 99 sheep still back hanging out at the corral. What the Bible seems to say about the 99 sheep is that they are more often than not peeved at their shepherd for just taking off without alerting them and ticked off that this one sheep is getting so much attention while we good obedient sheep still could use a good feeding and some tender, loving care! It's the bitterness of prodigal son's older brother. It's the grumbling Pharisees and scribes. It's the sheep who have gotten a sense of moral superiority because of the good decisions that *they* have been making about *their* lives in comparison to those *irresponsible sheep* who wander off.

Those 99 sheep are probably thinking: if we allow this sheep back into the fold are we condoning irresponsibility? Everyone might start running away if they get the attention of the shepherd like that!

We have to preserve the holiness, the righteousness of our little flock and if we allow this lost and now found sheep back are we going to be less holy?

Christians, forgetting that they are once and always lost sheep who have been found worry like the 99. They worry about who's in and who's out.

One form that worry has taken is in a practice called "fencing the table." Fencing the table is a practice where the Lord's Supper is only available to fully accredited church members. It's a "closed table." We here at the Community Church don't fence the table. We have an "open table" where we aren't going to stop anyone from participating in communion. "Traditionally, the phrase [fencing the table] goes back to early Scottish Calvinism, where the communion table literally had a fence around it, with a gate at each end. The members of the congregation were allowed to pass the gate on showing their communion token, a specially minted coin that served as an admission ticket and was given only to those who were in good standing

with the local congregation and could pass a test of the catechism."<sup>2</sup>

Fencing the table is what Christians do when they forget that they once were lost coins. Fencing the table is what Christians do when our call to Christ turns into policing the church community.

We don't have to worry about holiness because it's not ours to worry about. We don't have to worry about who comes to the table and who comes into the fold because the table and the fold is God's and God can take care of Godself.

When we get caught up in things like policing the front door, we forget the party inside. "Rejoice with me" Jesus says. "There will be a bigger party in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the 99 who don't need to repent."

Jesus is trying to draw us into the joy of God. It's the joy of a big sister who has finally found her little sister way out in South Dakota. It's the joy

---

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Petty, "Fencing the Table," <http://www.pullen.org/2016/07/03/fencing-the-table/>.

of photo albums and baseballs being found.

That joy is here in Issaquah. God is seeking and saving the lost right here. God is pursuing those we don't even know about in ways we can't even imagine—maybe even right across the street in our new Atlas neighbors. The Lord is going out in the world so that the lost can become found.

Some of us here in this room have been those sheep. We've been the lost, confused, maybe even scared sheep that were suddenly picked up, flung over strong shoulder and taken to safety by a shepherd we didn't even know we had.

Let's not forget that. Why waste our time with tokens of righteousness when Righteousness himself has called us by name. Let us lay aside every weight—drop those heavy tokens of self-righteousness—and run the race set before us and let us look to Jesus, the author, the perfecter, the shepherd of our faith.

If you look in your order of worship, some of you will find a paper token. If you're one of those, hand that token to the person next to you. And

if you were just handed a token, drop that token on the ground. We don't have tokens here at the Community Church. We don't have requirements of righteousness before God picks us up and carries us into the fold. We are simply lost coins who have been discovered in dusty corners and frightened sheep who have been picked up and carried home.

Now that our hands our empty we can use them for God's work. We're about to sing "My Faith Has Found a Resting Place." I'd invite you to use those empty hands of yours to grab a hand next to you. We drop our tokens so that we can pick up the joy of fellowship with other lost who have been found. As we sing, "My faith has found a resting place, not in device or creed. I trust the ever-living one. His wounds for me shall plead," squeeze those hands next to you, and enter into God's joy.

God has done this. God has brought us the lost sheep home. Let's sing: