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Series: *A First Century Physician Introduces the Cure*

Title: *Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Lost Son*

Text: Luke 15:1-31

Preacher: Kevin Freeman

Jesus invites believers to both diligently seek the lost and celebrate their restoration.

Your Invitation

During our time under mandated restrictions, our family has spent a lot of time together. During that time, I have noticed something with kids when they play, something that's universally true for children playing in a group. One child may have zero interest in a particular toy, but the second another child picks up that uninteresting toy, the toy itself transforms into the most coveted object in the universe. Envy kicks in for that ball or doll or car or bear. It doesn't even matter what the toy is. *"Hey, I want to play with that pen cap!" "That's my old Band-Aid!"*

Of course, you have probably noticed the same thing. You have also probably noticed that when a child gets that coveted toy - or object - back, it only holds his interest for about seventeen seconds before he realizes he doesn't care about it after all. Now I am glad that we adults are so much more sophisticated. We would *never* do the same thing, right? Perhaps our contentment is sometimes interrupted by someone else's good fortune.

Has your phone been adequate for you until you see the pictures a co-worker can now take with his new iPhone with forty-two cameras on the back?

Ladies, have you ever been perfectly happy with your purse until a friend shows you her new one?

Men, have you been content with your jealousy of a car until your neighbor comes home in a shiny, new SUV?

There's a certain resentful indignation that stirs up envy in us that our English language struggles to term, but we know it when we feel it. Perhaps you know of just the right term, but I am going to borrow a German word. You may be familiar with *schadenfreude*, the happiness felt at the misfortune of others, but the German language has an opposite term; *glückschmerz* is the sorrow or discomfort felt at the good fortune of others. For some reason, our fallen selves sometimes struggle with simply being happy for others.

I bring this up because our text today reveals a bad case of *glückschmerz*, bad enough that Jesus told three parables in response. What aroused this envy? Sinful people were flocking to Jesus, and the indignant righteous folks were agitated over it. Jesus's three parables remind each of us that **God invites us to celebrate his work in the lives of others**. We are invited to see his saving work and respond with joyful celebration! Turn with me to Luke 15.

Celebrating God's saving work in the lives of others can actually be difficult for us sometimes. There are big examples. Do you remember after the attacks of September 11, 2001, that some Christians were so hurt they were hesitant to want to evangelize Muslims? I am glad that did not last long, but it reminded me of Jonah's initial refusal to share God's message to the people of Nineveh. There are also small examples, whereby we might silently pass judgment on another who is less refined than we are, whose speech or dress are unbecoming, we imagine, for a follower of Christ. More to the point, however, is that we often do not celebrate God's saving work. Someone comes to faith or takes an important step of faith, and we politely affirm it without celebrating. We keep ourselves separate. **How do we accept the invitation to celebrate?** Jesus offers a solution in our passage, which covers the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son. Because of the length of the passage, I will read up through the first two parables, Luke 15:1-10.

Luke 15:1-10 ESV

1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.

2 And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

3 So he told them this parable:

4 *“What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, 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, rejoicing.*

6 *And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’*

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 coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently 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 before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

How do we accept God’s invitation to celebrate his saving work in others?

To answer that question, let me first briefly describe some of the events of the preceding chapter. Luke 14 records several incidents where Jesus repelled the religious leaders and attracted the spiritual rejects. Jesus first caused a stir when he healed a man on the Sabbath. Ironically, this was during a dinner in the home of a leader of the Pharisees. There was furor that Jesus would heal on the Sabbath, yet we know several people had to have worked on the Sabbath to prepare the meal. It was a double standard, and Jesus called them out for it. He then stepped on the toes of the guests who had jockeyed for position at the best seats around the table, and, for good measure, rebuked his host for inviting the well-to-do and not the poor to his meal. Scholars think that at this point one of the influential guests pressed Dale Carnegie’s, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* into the hands of Judas, asking him to persuade Jesus to read it.

Jesus may not have won over the religious leaders, but he did become wildly popular with those on the fringes of society. The outcasts flocked to him in droves. Even then, Jesus spoke against his own popularity with sayings that were difficult for all but his most devoted followers to accept. Yet people continued to come. That was the problem, if you were a Pharisee. In fact, if you were to read the first two verses of Luke 15, your spiritual health could be indicated by answering in which verse you found the problem. The religious leaders saw the problem in verse one, where tax collectors and sinners were flocking to Jesus, but Jesus found the problem to be in verse two, where the Pharisees and scribes grumbled about it.

1.) Take an INCLUSIVE view of OTHERS.

The first step toward accepting God’s invitation to celebrate is to **take an inclusive view of others**. Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in his parable. Which of them who owned a hundred sheep would not leave ninety-nine of them in search of one? The apparent answer was that none of them would. All would go in search of that wayward lamb. But it does not end there. Upon finding the lamb, they would carry that lamb over their shoulders. Then - get this - they would call friends over to celebrate the lamb’s safe return!

Before dismissing the scribes and Pharisees outright, we should try to understand their position. The Pharisee tradition sprang up some time after Nehemiah’s time, and they came into being for a good reason: to maintain the purity of Israel’s faith. By this time the nation knew of the commandments handed down by God to Moses. They knew all the times when God told them not to tolerate sin in the camp. In my reading in Leviticus this past week, for example, a man took the Lord’s name in vain, and God’s judgment on him was that he be stoned to death by the community. God told his people to take sin seriously, but they didn’t always do that. The cycle of the judges showed the disastrous results that came when the people followed the religious practices of nations around them. These were nations they had been told to drive out for the sake of their religious purity to God. Things got so bad over the centuries that God finally had both kingdoms of Israel conquered and taken away into captivity. Why? Because they tolerated sin, and slowly their hearts were turned away from the one, true God.

The Pharisees finally stepped in to say, This can never happen again. All of their rules were set up to prevent more backsliding. Because of Roman occupation, they could not execute the sinners in their day, but they could keep speaking out against them. Their warning was to stay socially distant from them, lest they infect you. These people were considered *them* and not *us*. But these were their own countrymen, children of Abraham, children of the promise. They were people who needed Jesus. Taking an inclusive view of others does not mean saying that everyone is already saved by God. Instead, it is recognizing each person as either a believer in Christ or one who we pray will become a believer soon. Jesus declared in his parable that if they could celebrate a found sheep or a found coin, could they not also celebrate a found person? To celebrate God's salvation? Or, to use some sheep puns, Wool you flock to the shear generosity of God? I know, that was baaaad.

I have always marveled that a celebration would ensue over a lost sheep or lost coin. I understand searching for the sheep, but once it has been found, wouldn't you just want to warm up your cold dinner in the microwave, watch a TV show, and then go to bed? Apparently not, but this is true even today. Dr. Timothy S. Laniak spent an entire academic year in 2003 to visit with Middle Eastern shepherds, getting to know them and their habits. The lessons he learned were put in devotional form in his book, *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*. A lost sheep is a cause for concern for the entire community, even today. Laniak writes the following story of Mrs. Araf, who lived in Karak, Jordan, and of whom it was joked that she loved her sheep as much as her own children.

One day, to her immense distress, Mrs. Araf lost track of one of her ewes. Because sheep regularly mingle with other flocks at common pastures during the day, she checked with her neighbors that night to see if the ewe had gone home with someone else. But none of them had seen the missing creature. She inquired among more distant neighbors over the next week, but no one had noticed a stray or found unidentified remains. Weeks turned into months without a sign of the missing ewe.

Then one day, two months later, a large flock came through the village led by a hired shepherd. As was still her habit, Mrs. Araf asked the young man if he had come across a lost sheep. As the words passed her lips, one of the ewes in the solid pack of passing sheep lifted her head, immediately recognizing the sound of her owner's voice. Mrs. Araf screamed with delight and rushed through the startled mass to embrace her lost sheep. It didn't take long before the whole village heard the commotion and shared in the reunion. Her flock was complete again.

In another account of a family finding two lost sheep, Laniak writes, "[It] was enough to fill that little house of ours with great rejoicing. Rejoicing did I say? Why, every member of our family asked us to tell again and again the story of how our sheep were sought for, found, and saved." (Laniak, Timothy S. *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks*. ShepherdLeader Publications, China: 2013. 78-79)

Are we too quick to forego rejoicing God's work in favor of other pursuits that are ultimately lacking?

2.) Take an EXPANSIVE view of GOD.

Another step toward accepting God's invitation to celebrate is found in **an expansive view of God**. The God seen by the Pharisees as holy and jealous was not at all the God Jesus portrayed. The religious leaders emphasized true aspects of God's character at the expense of other aspects. I remember once riding down the highway and seeing a car with a tire that was horrendously out of balance; maybe the bearings were bad. Instead of spinning normally, it appeared to be moving in an elliptical pattern, almost as though sometimes the tire was touching the pavement while at other times it was in the air. The wheel was not spinning normally and therefore had bad balance. The Pharisees' unbalanced view of God meant that their perception of him was skewed by certain attributes - his justice and holiness - at the expense of other attributes - his generosity and grace. Instead of seeing God as loving, they viewed him as spiteful. People can easily fall into this trap. In our time you can find many who emphasize the love of God but eliminate his justice; they forget God is holy and that we will one day stand before him.

In these parables, God is described in various ways. Many of us have heard sermons on the parable of the prodigal son and know that God is like the father in the story - a father who had no concern for how undignified it might appear that he took off running toward his son when he was still a long way off. He is also described as a shepherd, which we also

know is not exactly a respectable position. What would be considered worse? Being characterized as a woman, as in the next parable. A smelly, disreputable shepherd, a lowly woman, and a father who cannot seem to grasp the dignity of his position. This is the God who prioritizes his children and celebrates wholeheartedly and without caring how he looks to others. It reminds me of King David, whose wife was bothered by his unrestrained dancing in celebration of the return of God's ark to Jerusalem. Do you remember his response? *"I will become even more undignified than this!"*

This is a sticking point for some, who cannot fathom a God of incomparable majesty caring for each, individual person, celebrating each instance of saving grace. Yet it was Jesus who suffered the ultimate indignity to save us, his lost sheep. Christ crucified, Paul writes, is a stumbling block, something so nonsensical that it keeps people from accepting the forgiveness he offers. In other words, their conception of God is limited, not expansive enough to include such a sacrificial act.

But God goes further, and you might say that he has perfected the endzone dance. It isn't football season, of course, but we all know the wide variety of touchdown celebrations that happen in the endzones of dozens of NFL stadiums on gameday. I am a fan of the simple football slam dunk over the crossbar of the goal posts, but you can find much more elaborate, choreographed dances from the team. They, however, cannot compare with God and his heavenly angels when a lost person comes to Christ, but those Sunday afternoon celebrations should not be able to compare with the celebrations that happen in church sanctuaries across the country. You can tell a lot about a people by what they celebrate. Let's not allow touchdowns lead to bigger celebrations than salvations. Let's not let celebrity awards or the latest gossip outpace our attention toward baptisms. Let's not give social media posts more likes than we give vocal amens in our gathered worship as the people of God. We have a God who outstrips all of these things, and an expansive view of his glory makes other pursuits seem small in comparison.

3.) Take a HUMBLE view of OURSELVES.

Our pursuits aren't the only things that appear small. To accept God's invitation to celebrate his work, **we must take a humble view of ourselves**. You are likely familiar with the parable of the prodigal son. If not, then I will share that in this parable a wayward son asks for his inheritance before his father's death. The son then squanders his inheritance only to finally realize he is better off with his father, even if he is simply a hired hand. The father, however, welcomes him back fully as his son and throws a feast. There's only one problem. The other brother, who stayed loyal to his father during this ordeal, is so disgusted with his brother's return that he refuses to join in the celebration. The same father who ran to greet his returning son also left the party to plead with his other son to join in the celebration. His reasoning is that his son was lost but now is found - just like the lost sheep, just like the lost coin.

We do not know how the other son responded to this. That was the point, of course. Jesus put the ball in the Pharisees court, so to speak. The Father was acting out of character from their perspective. How would they react? By the end of the parable, the formerly lost son is enjoying the blessings of his father, while the supposedly loyal son is outside, unwilling to enter the celebration. The "found" was revealed to be "lost" after all. The parable reminds us that all of us need Jesus. Sometimes we look at the message of the gospel as something for us before we come to Christ, but the gospel is a message we need daily.

The smugness of the Pharisees betrayed an underlying assertion: I don't need the gospel. But we realize that each one of us needs the gospel. You may have become a Christian last week. You need the gospel. Have you been a Christian since you were five? You need the gospel. It is by grace that we have been saved through faith. Our works do not even factor in to the equation. Only when we realize that we need the saving power of Christ as much as one who is lost can we celebrate the work of Christ in each person's life.

Celebrate with pi π

You may know that today is actually a holiday of sorts. March 14 is Pi Day. In schools, math teachers like to offer pie - the kind you can eat - in celebration of the mathematical term, pi - the kind you cannot eat. What is this math term? Pi is calculated by dividing the circumference of a circle by its diameter which results in an answer of 3.141592653589793538... and on and on for this irrational number, because the resulting figure never stops. An article

on the website Exploratorium states that the origin of pi goes back four thousand years, but even calculating the number of seconds in that span of time would not equal the number of places pi can be calculated to. The number never stops. Christian, our celebration of God's saving work is a lot like pi; it will keep going and going. We had better practice celebrating now!

It was on August 13, 1727 that a similar celebration began. The Moravian believers were gathered in their refuge on the property of Count Zinzendorf for a baptism and communion service. What took place was a work of God's Spirit. People began to fervently call upon God and celebrate his work. They established a 24/7 prayer service that lasted one hundred years and was responsible for a missionary movement. They influenced John and Charles Wesley and even William Carey, the father of modern missions, who remarked, "*See what these Moravians have done.*" Those Moravians would perhaps have said, "*See what God has done!*"

Celebration begets celebration. It's infectious, and we dare not keep our distance from it. Celebration attracts others, who are drawn into the commotion of the work of God. God offers you the invitation to celebrate his saving work. Will you accept it?