

# Search Party

## 4. Who cares

August 28, 2022

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How many dog lovers do we have in the house today? Let me show you a picture: this is Ruby. Sadly, Ruby was abused, but she was rescued and lives in an animal shelter now. This is how the shelter describes her: “Ruby is a sweet hound mix girl that absolutely adores spending time with her humans... She is a quiet girl that is house trained, crate trained and so gentle. Ruby has been abused... now she is ready to fill her forever home with love and butt wiggles.”

So how many want to adopt Ruby now? When you walked in today you weren't thinking about adopting a dog, but after seeing her picture and hearing her story, even people who don't like dogs want to help her out. Actually, Ruby lives in Connecticut, so she's not local.

Animal rescues know that pictures tug on our hearts, so they make commercials with lots of pictures of animals in need. Statistics might be accurate but they don't make us care. Seeing pictures opens our eyes and prompts us to care about a reality we otherwise wouldn't care about. This is why Linda and I agree that she can never work at a rescue site, because she'd see animals in need and bring them all home and we'd be crowded out of our house.

**Jesus wants us to care about lost people like he does**, but there were no videos or pictures when he was physically on the earth. So, he told stories to get his point across; they're called parables. A parable is a story with a point.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables in a row with the same theme; this is the only place in the scriptures where he does this, so we know it is an important message. Today we're going to look at the most famous of the three.

**Luke 15:11-24** <sup>11</sup> *Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.*

The son's request sounds a little rude to us today, but back in New Testament times, it would have been down-right offensive. The son asking for his inheritance is like saying to the father, “I wish you were dead so I could have your money.” The listeners would have expected the father to say, “No way!” and disown him, but in the parable the father says, “OK, if that's what you want.”

<sup>13</sup> *“Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed*

*pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

The fun times don't last for the young son. He ends up broke and feeding pigs, which is about as low as a good Jewish boy could get. Pigs were considered religiously unclean. Jews were not supposed to eat or touch them. But here he is feeding them while he himself was almost starving.

*<sup>17</sup> "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.*

If you've heard this story before, you know what happens. Jesus' first listeners, however, have been expecting the father to tell the son, "You're darn right you're not worthy to be called my son. You made your bed, go sleep with the pigs." But that's *not* how the story goes.

*"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' <sup>22</sup> "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.*

The father does doesn't just accept the son back; he runs to meet his son. The father forgets his dignity and runs to embrace his son. The son starts the speech he rehearsed, but the father totally ignores him. Instead, he says "Let's party!" He explains why he's throwing a party: "For my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

By using surprise and story, Jesus was trying to tug on our hearts -- to communicate a message as vividly as possible to those who were listening; and who was listening? **Luke 15:1-2** *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* So Jesus told this parable to **two different groups** of people: sinners and Pharisees.

**Group #1: Sinners: people who ignored God and his ways.** They didn't follow the Old Testament religious laws. They didn't worship in the synagogue or keep the Sabbath. Some of them didn't believe in God. Others believed there was a God but it didn't make a difference in the way they lived. They did what they wanted. Yet, Jesus' message to everyone who ignored God is: "Come home. God won't reject you; he will embrace you."

That is an amazing message of mercy and grace. After hurting God by our actions and attitudes, when we come to our senses and realize what we've done, we can turn back to God and he will embrace us. In each of the three parables Jesus tells in Luke 15, there is a celebration when the lost are found. There's a message in that.

Jesus was also speaking to the Pharisees. **Group #2: Pharisees who were committed to pleasing God.** These are the good guys – the ones who lived right. They were very focused on obeying all 613 laws found in the Old Testament. They applied those laws to every part of their lives. And verse 1 says they were upset with Jesus attending parties: eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors – people far from God.

Jesus adds a conclusion to the parable that speaks to those who have been working at pleasing God. When the party is going on, there is one person missing:

*Luke 15:25-32* <sup>25</sup> “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

<sup>28</sup> “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

<sup>31</sup> “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

The elder son refuses to party with everyone else. Why? He says it is unfair, but the reality is that he doesn't care about his brother. We only celebrate when we've lost something valuable, then it is found. The father deeply loved the younger son, so he rejoiced when he was found. The elder brother seemed to be fine without his brother around.

Jesus' message to the Pharisees was a question: “Do you care?” Do you care enough about people who are far from God – spiritually dead and lost --- that you will celebrate when they return? God loves and cares for them – do you? Do you share God's heart, his passion for lost people to come back?

The bridge spanning the Yangtze River in Nanjing, China is the most popular place in the world to commit suicide. On average, 5 people per week attempt suicide there. A blue-collar worker named Chen Si was walking along the bridge in 2000 when he saw a woman preparing to jump. He intercepted her and saved her life.

But that didn't stop others from trying after that. Tragically, many succeeded. The suicides bothered Chen Si so much that a few years later he decided to do something about it. Since December 19, 2003, Chen Si has spent every weekend patrolling the bridge looking for people who might be contemplating suicide. Sometimes he is on foot, sometimes he's on a motorbike. He looks for people who appear depressed or under great pressure. When he spots people who are walking without any direction or spirit, he approaches them and tries to talk with them. He listens to their problems and tries to help.

Sometimes they are already over the railing and he has to grab them and pull them back. He has saved over 400 people from death. A movie about his life is called *The Angel of Nanjing*. Chen Si is a man who cares.

Jesus wants us to care about people who are committing spiritual suicide by walking away from God. They are not walking off a bridge, but they are walking with no purpose or ultimate meaning in their lives. And they are walking toward an eternity without God. Jesus used the parable to help us see this.

**Appearances can blunt the reality of lostness.** We see the outside of people's lives: the physical part. That doesn't tell us anything about their spiritual state. They can be in great physical shape, have a healthy bank account, and a good job, but still be far from God. They are spiritually dead. Do we care?

Sometimes we see people's emotional state as either happy or distressed, but that doesn't tell us whether they are alive spiritually. When we care for people in need, we will reach out. If you remember being the prodigal, it's not hard to grasp the need. If we are going to be a church that partners with God in reaching and welcoming others, we need to act like the Father and not like the older son.

If Jesus was telling this story to us today it might go something like this (see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RXi\\_cZ57sq](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RXi_cZ57sq) ). Now you know why there were a bunch of sheets hanging along the church driveway. It isn't laundry day; it is a visual reminder to those of us who are followers of Jesus – to care. To commit to welcoming people who have been far from God.

Those sheets declare that Crossroads Church is a people who love others enough to party when they return. They are our declaration to ourselves that we will be welcoming people who are searching; that we will go out of our way to help people find their way back to God. So much so, that we will be deliberate about inviting people for September 18 to our worship service or our groups.

You have a card on your seat. Can you write down the names of several people this week whom you might invite? Then take a simple step this week: have a conversation with someone you care about, someone you might invite. Just reach out.

Maybe today you realize that you need to come home to God yourself. Maybe you have ignored God and his ways. Today those sheets are a message to you that you

can come home. Your Heavenly Father is waiting for you with open arms, and so are we.

Maybe you've done things that you are not proud of; maybe you've messed up your relationships, your life, and your future. Jesus says, "Come home."

Or maybe your life looks fine on the outside, but inwardly you know you haven't been connected to God. You have been head-long after your plans and ignored God's purposes for your life. Jesus says, "Come home."

When you do, there will be a celebration – a party!