

## **The Rev. Billy Cerveny:**

How we doing, everybody? I hope it's been a good week.

I was preparing our sermon today, my sermon today, and I was realizing I love stories, and I love good storytellers. If you didn't notice that about me, I love to tell a story. But I love good storytellers. When I sit and listen to people, they just have that gift. They have the ability to see different things that I can't see normally, or they have these insights that they can wrap together with these colorful words and things like that. So as a result, when I was growing up and I got to be a little like in high school, I was really fascinated by reporters, people that were, you know, war correspondents or investigative reporters or political reporters, all types of things, and I really, really, really wanted to do that. So when I graduated from college, I got a job out in Los Angeles as a writer for a magazine. I did that for a few years. I was writing out there, and a buddy of mine called me, and he tells me about this television network that was starting up in Washington, D.C., and he said, "Would you be great for this?" So I sent my resume off to the head of this network, and I never heard back, and I started calling him. And I called him like every day, and I left a voice going like, "Hey, it's Billy Cervaty, and sorry, I must have been in the shower, didn't hear you call me back," or whatever. You know, one of those kind of obsessive things, and I kept calling him. And then finally, one day, he just, I just wore him down. He picked up the phone and said, "What?"

And I said, "Hey, I've sent you my resume. I don't know if you got it. I've left you some voicemails, and I don't know if you've got my voicemails." He's like, "Oh, I got them." He's like, "Who are you?" I told him my story, and he says, "I got to tell you, no one's ever called me like you have over and over." He goes, "I like your grit, son. I like your grit. I'm going to give you a shot. I want to see if you have what it takes."

So flew to D.C., moved there. I remember my first day at this television network, I'm sitting around this table with all these people,

all these producers and reporters, and I was so excited to get there. The only problem is, I said yes to this job. The only problem was, the only experience I had in television was watching it.

I had never done anything intelligent. I had never been in a television studio, but I was like, "I'll figure it out." So my first time I was at this production meeting, and I'm sitting around a table with people, and they're all talking business talk, and everybody's dressed a certain way, and talking about the stories they've done, and I remember sitting there thinking to myself, "I feel like I'm playing dress-up."

I feel like I am just doing my best imitation, like juggling, trying to distract people from the fact that I don't know what I'm doing, and the second, the authenticity police are going to kick the door in, and they're going to come in and drag me away in handcuffs. I have no business being there, but I wanted to belong so badly." And all I could hear was that guy's voice, "Do you have what it takes?"

Well, the first story I got, I can't remember the title, I saw military something or other. And my boss said, "Hey, you know, you need to get someone on the Armed Services Committee." I'm like, "I don't know anybody on the Armed Services Committee." I pulled out the sheet, and there in the middle of it, it says, "Representative Tilly Fowler." Now, she was from Jacksonville, if you guys don't know. So I called her office, I'm like, "Hey, can I get an interview?" They said, "Yes." So I showed up, and I'm with my cameraman, I'm trying to act like I knew what I was doing, trying to act cool, and I was like, "I'm Bill Servany here for my interview with Representative Fowler." Yeah, okay. And then the door opens, and her office was right off the main section there, and I could hear them talking, and my camera guy, sitting there, is just sort of hard-scrabble dude, and he said, "Hey, Billie Servany is here for your interview." And all I hear in this southern voice, sweet voice, go, "Is that little Billie Servany?"

And I melted.

My cameraman looked at me, and he's like, "Little Billie Servany, huh?"

Totally busted, this confirmation that I just wasn't who I said I was. Now, you laugh at that story because you can totally relate to your own version of it. Have you ever felt that way, right? Where you go to a social situation, or a job,

or you do something where you just want to belong, you want to be a part of that thing, but you feel like you're playing dress-up.

You feel like everybody else belongs there, but you don't, and you're just trying to do your best not to get kicked out. Have you ever felt that way at church?

Have you ever looked around you, and you feel like, "Man, if they only knew, if they only knew what I was, you come here, you feel like you've got question marks all over you."

Sometimes it feels like the soundtrack to coming to faith is just as I am.

But once you're a Christian, the soundtrack of your life is, "Do I have what it takes?"

Parentheses, you don't belong. We can relate, right? Now, I'm going to tell you, if that's you, and I know it's all of you, if you tell me you can't relate to that in some way, you're lying.

But if you do feel that way, if you remember feeling that way, you're not some uniquely broken toy.

You might be broken, but you're not broken any differently than anybody else is, because that sense that we have, it's like one of the most fundamental ways that sin plays out in our life.

You know the story of sin? We talk about it all the time. When sin entered the world, it's the first fruits of sin.

When Adam and Eve ate and declared their independence from God, the first fruits of sin in their life was this soul-crushing shame.

This shame that created this division from God,

that permeated their whole spirit, that just created division from God, division from themselves, from each other.

Shame, it's that thing where guilt says, "I've done a bad thing." Shame is that emotional that feeling that we have that speaks to the center of our being, that says, "I am a bad thing."

It is up to me to fix it. I'm a fraud. I'm invalid. And if anyone saw me as I truly was, they would reject me. I wouldn't belong.

And what makes it worse? It's up to us. We've got to do it ourselves. We've got to fix this ourselves. At least that's what our flesh says.

There's a few ways that we respond to this, isn't there?

There's several ways, actually. One of the most obvious things that we do is we numb ourselves, because no one likes to feel that way.

So we numb ourselves, and we can do it in all sorts of ways. We can do Instagram. We can do it through work or through all the food. I love that one. We can numb ourselves through food, drinking, whatever it is.

We just try to numb it more and more. But the truth of the matter is, it only makes it worse. The other ways we can do it we can do it like I did. We can play dress up. We try to become the thing that we aren't. If I could just do the best imitation, one day I'll wake up and I'll feel like I belong. But the truth is, you do that long enough, all it creates is anxiety.

My favorite, and I think the most dangerous way that we do this in our world, is to blame.

Man, you find someone who's a blamer, and we all do it in some respects, and you'll find someone who has a deep shame.

See, the way it works is I can't bear that dissonance that's inside my heart, that's broken my heart. I can't handle that discomfort. I can't take responsibility for the pain in my heart. I can't take responsibility for the anger I feel or the discontentment. So I have to hang it on something on the world outside of myself. It's your fault. It's who you are. It's what you believe.

It's how you think. It's your political views. It's the thing you said. You're the reason it's all so bad. And if I could just get rid of that thing, then everything in this world would be fine.

I can tell you what, that is the number one marriage killer for sure.

But I can tell you, we see it playing out all in our world.

We saw it last week. Man, this works through politics.

If I could just remove your ideology from the world, if I could just take what you are and get rid of you, everything's going to be okay.

Now, I'm not saying all ideologies are neutral, and I'm not saying it's not okay to argue against certain things and to push back on certain things, but I'm saying even if you did win,

that disconnect and that discontent in your heart will still be there.

And I promise you that blame and that hanging, that internal discontent was very, very strongly in play, and that poor, that lost kid that climbed on that roof last week and shot Charlie Kirk.

I promise you, could not bear the discontent of his own heart, so he's going to blame the world and take it out on them.

Now, I wish I could say that as Christians, we don't deal with that in our own hearts, right? But even hearing this, you know that's not true.

We know we have our own version of that.

The difference is where once you were left to use all the things in this world to try and either numb that pain

or to navigate that sense of disconnect, what happens, the Lord comes in, and you have a Savior now who steps in the middle of this, who can walk us through it. So how does he do it?

We just read in Luke 15, verses 1 through 10, we're reading about Israel and the leaders of scribes in the Pharisee. And in Israel, let me tell you, there's been very few places in the world that was more obsessed with who belongs and who doesn't. Who was in and who was out? I mean, they were God's chosen people. They were chosen, the other people weren't, and so they say, we're in, everyone else is out, kind of.

It's not that simple because when you got into the mix with Israelites, the Jewish people, they were defined by their laws.

They were defined by how meticulously you kept them, whether you were ceremonially clean or whether you were ceremonially unclean. And these people, they built this entire religio-industrial complex with scribes and Pharisees to not only monitor those rules and who was keeping them and who wasn't them, keeping them, they built this entire strata of people to create new laws,

to create even stiffer regulations, to build on the ones that God didn't hand down at Mount Sinai.

And as a result, they created this oppressive system.

And it says in verse 1, the tax collectors and the sinners they were all drawing near to Jesus.

And the Greek verb there for drawing near it implies this continual action. So what that verse was really saying was, these sinners and these tax collectors, they were coming to Jesus, and they kept coming. And they kept coming, and Jesus kept receiving them, and he kept welcoming them.

And the first two, the Pharisees and the scribes, they grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and he eats with them."

Now Luke here, he's intentionally using the word grumble because that's the same word that is used to describe the Israelites when Moses was leading him through the desert, and they were being rebellious and they were pushing away God and they were like, "Who are you? We were better in Egypt." They grumbled and they grumbled. And what God is doing here and what Luke is doing here is he's drawing a connection.

He's saying these people were no better than the rebellious Israelites in the desert.

And they hated Jesus for this because they were watching him, and they're like, "They don't belong. We're the ones that belong."

And not only are we the ones that belong, but we're the ones that get to say who belongs. So what do you think you're doing, Jesus? Who do you think you are?"

And Jesus he tells these three familiar parables, and there's all supposed to be read together. The one about the lost sheep, which we just read, the woman about the lost coin, and then what comes to the very end of this, which we didn't read today, we'll get into another time, is the parable of the prodigal son. But that's what happens in the order here. And the first story we see this shepherd. He's got a hundred sheep, and one of them runs off.

And it says the good shepherd is so concerned about the welfare of the one that he leaves the 99 and he crosses the countryside and he finds the one that belongs to him and he picks it up. He throws it over his shoulder. We've all seen the picture. He's walking back, and he gets home, and he says, "Everyone, celebrate." He throws a party for his sheep.

And the scripture says, "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance."

And then he talks about this woman, and she loses a coin, and she tears her house apart, turns on all the lamps. She sweeps from top to bottom until she finds this coin, and she calls all her friends and she says, "Let's have a party. Let's celebrate this coin. There must have been some coin." And she

celebrates this coin, and it says again, "So it is in heaven with one sinner repents." There's that kind of celebration. Now we've heard these a lot, and it sounds like these are these cozy parables, right?

These are sweet and cozy parables. We've got a sheep being snuggled. We've got an old lady who's finding a coin. Yeah, they're cozy as long as you're not a scribe or a Pharisee because what's happening in that moment is Jesus is getting in their face and he is challenging their categories. He is blowing up their perspective about what it means to be lost, and he's blowing up their perspective on what it means to be found.

And he's doing that for us, too. See, when they hear Jesus' parable about the sheep, they're blind.

They're listening to him, and as they're grumbling over everything that's going on, and they're thinking to themselves, "Wait, we keep the law.

We have earned the right to be in the presence of God. We are part of the 99. We sit with folded hands waiting for our God. They are the bad ones." But the reader knows, the person reading this passage knows what Jesus knows.

and knows what Jesus is getting at. And what he's saying is there is none righteous.

You self-righteous hypocrites.

You brood of vipers, you whitewashed tombs. Isaiah 56, all like sheep have gone astray.

You aren't one of the 99, you're one of the one. You're just as sinful. You just can't see it.

See, there's two ways we can be lost.

The first way we can be lost is the most obvious way. Sex, drugs, and rock and roll, all the things that are bad and taboo, the things that, you know, the billboard sends.



Being irreligious, rejection of God.

That keeps you from God because you either reject him or you think you're too wicked to be accepted by him. So you're lost.

But the other way that you can be lost, what Jesus is pointing out here, what we see held up, is we can be lost through our religiosity.

Like the Pharisees and the scribes, they're holier than thou, they're self-righteous, this clean living.

I feel like they can do it because it keeps them from God because they think they're good enough.

And the problem is, they can't even see it because they're doing good.

It's a hard one because you also don't wanna see it. If you put yourself in that camp, you don't wanna see it because it's offensive to you because it means that after all you've done, all your work, all the things you do, you're no better than these tax collectors and these sinners.

You're the same, you're on the same level.

See how this blows up our categories?

You see how it changes the way we see how we can be lost by irreligious or being religious?

Where do you fall in this?

How do you know where you fall in this?

Great Lipsmith test as you're looking at this and finding out, like when you picture the 99 sheep, do you think about yourself as one of them?

Or do you think about yourself as the one that Jesus had to go get?

Or do you think about yourself as I was the one that Jesus had to go get, but now that I'm in part of the faith, I am still part of the 99.

But the truth of the matter is, you're the one that Jesus has to go get every single day.

Every day he needs to throw us over the shoulders. Every day, he needs to bring me back to the fold. Every day, I am trying to find my way out of the sheep pen.

We do this last week as we touched a minute ago.

It was such a tragic scenario.

And I posted a little thing online. I don't ever usually do things like this, but this was so tragic.

I simply said, what happened to Charlie Kirk was evil, full stop.

If you could feel, and I'm paraphrasing, if somehow you feel that his political differences with you justifies the murdering of a father, a husband, a son, then you need to examine your heart.

And man, most people were very pleasant, but there were some people on there. They came on and I could just feel it. And they were holding back at first, and then they let it fly.

And in their minds, there's this, oh, you over there.

You in that camp, the way you think, the way you, and just total separation, this total holier than now, and I was like, oh, how could you be so insensitive in this moment?

I didn't like what they were doing, I didn't like the things they were saying,

but I can tell you what was going on in my heart. Oh, you over there.

Oh, you over there.

How deluded you are. Now, listen, I don't agree with them.

I don't agree with them.

And I have legitimate arguments with perspectives and things like that, just as you might have as well.

I can tell you in that moment, I sure felt better than them, right? It's in my heart too. It's in my heart.

Jesus blows up our categories for what it means to be lost,

but also what it means to be found. It describes in Pharisees the roasting Jesus,

because he's hanging out with the lost.

And in his economy, what Jesus is saying is he's saying, the only way for these sinners to get right for God, or where the Pharisees are saying, the only way that sinners can get right with God is if they straighten up their life, they stop doing what they're doing.

They gotta make the right sacrifices, eat the right way, spend time with the right people. They just gotta do it right, gotta get it all together.

And Jesus, if you didn't catch it in the parable, he's saying that these shepherds and this woman, this shepherd and this woman, represent God. And the lost sheep and the lost coin they represent us.

And in both of these parables, the sheep or the coin, they don't do anything to contribute to their salvation, to their rescue. They're totally passive.

The sheep didn't bleat his way back to God, or to the shepherd.

The sheep didn't meet the shepherd halfway.

The coin didn't pop up on its edge and roll towards the widow or the woman, and find its home back in the purse. They didn't do their part.

The only part that the sheep and the coin played was being helpless.

And the shepherd found the sheep, and he put him over his shoulders, and he brought him home.

And it's God who saves.

The one and the one being saved adds nothing to the equation.

All right, wait a second, because when you read this passage,

there is that part where it says, talks about the joy in heaven over these sinners who repented. Don't we have to repent?

Isn't repentance the key that unlocks God picking us up and throwing us over his shoulders and carrying us back? No.

See in verse 10, it says, the repentance we read about in verse 10, it's not the reason Jesus went looking for the sheep and put him on his shoulders.

Repentance is the result of Jesus leaving the comfort of his home, finding the sheep, and throwing it onto his shoulders.

Don't miss this, this is huge.

Repentance, that heart posture that knows we are sinners.

Repentance is that heart posture that admits how much we play dress up. The heart posture of repentance says, I wanna belong so bad. I wanna feel better than them.

I wanna feel holier than them. I wanna feel like I'm not capable of posting things like that online in other people, or at least roasting this, making the same comments in my heart as they were making in theirs.

Repentance is that deep understanding that I need the grace of Jesus,

and that if he doesn't throw me over his shoulders and pick me up and carry me home,

I ain't coming home.

The heart of repentance, that heart posture that clings to him as we turn from sin, that is not what happens. I don't have a repentant heart in order for God to pick me up.

It is when God picks me up that I begin to have a repentant heart.

What does the scripture say Romans 2.4? Do you not know?

It's God's kindness that leads you to repentance.

It is his kindness.

It's when you deserved it the least that God came and found you, and he lavished you with his love and affection, and he rescued you from the situation that you were in. He sees you when you're sick. He sees you when you don't have even the inkling to look for him,

and he pursues you, and he throws you over his shoulder, and he never lets you go, and in this room, I bet everyone could tell a story, a version of how God's done that. That receiving that gift, receiving that grace, that is what makes our hearts repentant.

We spend so much of my lives, I have spent so much of my life asking that question, do I have what it takes?

My relationships as a Christian, as a Christ follower, do I have what it takes?

I want you to hear what Jesus says about this.

No, you don't, but I do, says the Lord.

I have what it takes.

Let me give you a better question, he says.

Will you trust the one to throw you across his shoulders and carry you home?

Do you trust the one that has already carried you home? Do you trust those shoulders?

Because it's those same shoulders that carried across for your sake.

It's those same shoulders, shoulders that carry you now.

Do you trust that?

Will you lift your eyes in repentance, even right now? If you lift your eyes in repentance, can you hear it?

Can you hear what happens when we do?

There's a party going on. Whether you came to Jesus right now, or you came to Jesus 20 years ago, or you never knew a time where you didn't believe, they are rejoicing over you with singing, and they will never stop. And do you know who's leading that song?

Jesus of Nazareth, the shepherd,

the one who left the 99 to find you, the one, me, the one.

Amen.