

***“Keep Your Eyes On the Prize”***

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September 12, 2010

Luke 15:1-10

*Have you ever lost something of value?* I would imagine that we all have...it's a common experience. I can remember being with a group of my college friends in a row boat on my aunt and uncle's farm pond near Nevada, Missouri. Don't ask me why but, I suddenly stood up and dove into the pond. It only took me a nana-second to realize why everything was blurry when I came to the surface. My glasses had come off in the dive and of course I dove back down frantically searching for them but I came up empty handed and blind as a bat. You never realize how valuable glasses are until you lose them and you are several hundred miles from campus.

Then there are irreplaceable objects that, when we lose them, we experience a different sense of loss. Connie lost a special watch her father had given her for high school graduation. A Hamilton watch, no less. Glasses are replaceable but a Father's gift is irreplaceable. Needless to say we turned the house upside down looking for that watch. But we never did find it.....a mystery to this day! If we live long enough we will lose something. No doubt we would hear some pretty humorous stories if we began to tell the extraordinary measures we have taken to find the valuable objects we have lost.

Our Gospel is all about searching for the lost....

Read [Luke 15:1-10](#)

**15** Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup>And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." <sup>3</sup>So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup>"Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? <sup>5</sup>When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <sup>6</sup>And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>"Or what

woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

<sup>9</sup>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.'

<sup>10</sup>Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." ***The Word of the Lord...Thanks!***

It seems that every time we turn around we see Jesus eating with outcasts. Jesus just keeps being Jesus, hanging out with all the wrong people, inviting them to the Golden Nugget and celebrating everyone who accepts his invitation. And what do the Pharisees and scribes do in response? They complain and point and wag their fingers in disgust. For the umpteenth time, they try to set Jesus straight by telling him he shouldn't hang out with "*those people.*" Any good, respectable Rabbi ought to know that "*those people*" are the wrong people.

So Jesus tells them a couple of amazing stories. A shepherd was responsible for 100 sheep but one had nibbled its way into lostness. Amazingly the shepherd loves that one lamb so much he leaves the 99 and searches until he finds the lost sheep. He puts that sheep on his shoulders and carries it safely home. But there's more to this story....the shepherd then invites all of his friends and throws a grand party to celebrate finding the one sheep that had been lost. *Can't you just hear them rejoicing?*

Jesus tells another story, this time about a woman who had lost one of her ten coins. She turned her house upside down looking for that one coin and when she found it.....another party....great rejoicing. *Do you get the picture?* God loves so dearly that God will do whatever it takes to find those who are lost. God never gives up! God keeps searching like a devoted Shepherd who seeks to rescue a single sheep. God keeps searching like a determined woman who will let nothing stand in her way of finding the lost coin. And when the lost lamb and the lost coin are found there is high-spirited rejoicing because that which was lost is found! This is the Gospel....the good news of God's steadfast love and never ending pursuit of the prize. God's eyes are always on the prize. Guess what? We are the prize...you and I!

*Do you know what it is like to be lost?* I know we usually think of “lost” as a TV show and we all hate to admit when we are lost. We will do anything to give the impression that we are not lost but in control of the situation.....after all we like to believe that we are captains of our own fate. But, in those scary, quiet, bedrock-honest moments when we look deep within, we admit, at least to ourselves, that we know what it is like to be lost.

When a spouse or close friend dies, we know what it is like to be lost. When we are forced out of a job, we know what it is like to be lost. When we remember the towers coming down on September 11, 2001, we know what it is like to be lost. When our home goes into foreclosure, we know what it is like to be lost. When we are forced to decide between paying medical bills *or* buying food, we know what it is like to be lost. When a trusted friend makes it clear they no longer want to be friends, we know what it is like to be lost. When we wake up one morning and realize the dream for which we’ve been striving will never come to pass, we know what it is like to be lost.

But listen, again, to the good news again. Jesus said, ***“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”***

When we are lost this we can count on.....Jesus is searching for us...to find us and bring us home. Love will prevail and he will find us! *“I have found my sheep that was lost....and there was much joy in heaven.”* Jesus keeps his eyes on the prize and *we* are the prize!

But there are other types of lostness. The stories of the lost sheep and lost coin were prompted by church people who thought they were righteous but were, in fact, lost. The Pharisees and the scribes always took “holy” offense when Jesus welcomed and enjoyed the company of tax collectors and sinners.... *“those people.”* How often have we, in the church, labeled certain people as *“those people?”* The truth is....when we label we are lost!

Today, less than a mile from Fairmont, *Daria Schaffnit* is being ordained as associate pastor at David's United Church of Christ. Daria is a lesbian. Regardless of whether you agree or disagree with the ordination of homosexuals or lesbians, please....for God's sake....let us repent from thinking of homosexual and lesbian individuals as "*those people*." I suppose you know that we church people have a notorious reputation of looking down our noses at people who do not measure up to our standards whether those standards have to do with sexual orientation, morals, theology, attending worship, politics, life style or whatever. At times this is a false stereotype because we are genuinely gracious, patient, open, kind and tolerant people but, at other times, when we really label others as "*those people*" our notorious reputation is deserved. When we label...we are lost. The good news is Christ's steadfast love....."*I have found my sheep that was lost...and there was much joy in heaven.*" Jesus keeps his eyes on the prize and wayward church people are the prize!

There are times when we think we are doing the righteous thing but, in fact, are causing extreme injury and harm to others and, even, to the name of Jesus Christ. One such person is Pastor Terry Jones who, in his lostness, threatened to burn the Muslim holy book, the Quran. Burning holy books is not the Jesus way. Assuming all Muslims are terrorists is not the Jesus way. I am so thankful Pastor Jones changed his mind. I can picture Jesus coming alongside Pastor Jones, warming his heart with grace, placing the misguided pastor on his shoulders and bringing him back to the gospel of peace, reconciliation and love for all. The good news is Christ's steadfast love..."*I have found my sheep that was lost...and there was much joy in heaven.*" Jesus keeps his eyes on the prize and Pastor Jones is the prize!

I know this because there was another man who thought he was faithfully serving God but was, in fact, working against God. This man went so far as to hunt down Christians and throw them into dungeons. This went on for quite some time and the more success the man had persecuting Christians the more determined he was to serve God in this misguided way. But God did not write the man off as a hopeless case. On a lonely road, the Great Shepherd came to him and, in dramatic fashion, put the man on his shoulders and brought him into a new way of life. To mark the transformation God changed the man's name from Saul to Paul. "*I have found my sheep that was lost...and there was much joy in heaven.*" Jesus keeps his eyes on the prize and Paul was the prize!

Before Paul's life changing encounter with Jesus he had everything the world could give. Position, reputation, education, money....he was a rising star and one who wielded much power. However, over and over Paul makes the point that what he once had doesn't even compare to the joy of being found by Jesus Christ. Paul proclaimed, "**because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ....** <sup>14</sup> ***I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.***"

For Paul learned that even when he was lost, Jesus kept his eyes on him and considered Paul a real prize. Then in God's good timing, Jesus claimed Paul as his own to the joy of all in heaven. Paul saw the light and love in Jesus Christ and from that day onward, Jesus became the prize for Paul.

That is the good news of Jesus Christ who loves us so much that he searches for us when we are lost and when we allow ourselves to be picked up and placed on Jesus' shoulders we, in turn, recognize Jesus as our greatest prize. By the grace of God, may we always keep our eyes on the Prize, even Jesus Christ, who first had his eyes on you and me!

*(Prayer)*

Amen