

Festival of Friendship  
September 26, 2004  
Luke 15:1-7

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

**Finding the Lost Is Cause for Rejoicing**

1. Lost in sin
2. Found by grace
3. Heaven rejoices

***<sup>NIV</sup> Luke 15:1 Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him.<sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable:<sup>4</sup> "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?<sup>5</sup> And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders<sup>6</sup> and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'<sup>7</sup> I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.***

Dear Friends,

Jodee Hogg and Matt Ramige were presumed lost this past week. The single-engine plane in which they and three other people were flying crashed and burned in a remote, mountainous area near Glacier National Park in Montana. When you hear words like "plane crash," "mountains," and "fire," it's natural to assume that the occupants of the plane have been lost. And, indeed, three of the occupants of the plane, including the pilot, did lose their lives. But Jodee Hogg, suffering burns, and Matt Ramige, with a broken back, managed to walk for 29 hours through rough terrain until they arrived at a highway and flagged down a passing motorist. I think it's quite likely that in Jodee's hometown of Billings, Montana, and in Matt's hometown of Jackson, Wyoming, people are rejoicing as they learn that their lost loved ones have been found.

Finding the lost isn't always so dramatic. It could just be that I find my "lost" car keys or my "lost" wallet. It may be the return of a stray pet. But sometimes finding the lost is far more dramatic, because it involves finding lost sinners and saving them from an eternity in hell. And when that happens, Jesus says it's cause for rejoicing in heaven. The message of the opening verses of Luke 15 is that **Finding the Lost is Cause for Rejoicing**. This morning we want to see 1] that we were all once lost in sin, but 2] that we've been found by grace, and 3] that the response in heaven to finding of every lost sinner is rejoicing.

### 1. Lost in sin

Jesus apparently hadn't conferred with his public relations consultants before doing what he did here in Luke 15. It says, "*Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him.*" Jesus had allowed himself to be seen in the company of the outcasts of society—people whose sins were common knowledge. As the "decent" people—the Pharisees and teachers of the law—observed Jesus keeping such company, they were appalled. They had long ago written the tax collectors and "sinners" off as a total loss because their bad behavior was a matter of public record. And now they thought they were seeing a disturbing pattern in Jesus' behavior. "*This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" Jesus seemed drawn to these pariahs. While the very sight of such folks was enough to make the Pharisees reach for the hand-sanitizer, Jesus engaged these outcasts in conversation. He seemed genuinely interested in them.

He was genuinely interested. Jesus once described his mission on this earth this way: "**The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.**" (Luke 19:10) Lost is a word that occurs throughout this 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke. There's the lost sheep and the lost coin and the lost son. Sometimes being lost isn't all that serious. Some of you might get lost in the Sunday paper this afternoon. Or maybe you'll get lost when you're out for a drive. But you consult a map or you ask directions or (if you're a man) you drive until you get your bearings, and then you're not lost anymore. But the kind of lost-ness that Jesus is dealing with here is much more serious. He's going after people who have wandered from God. They are, for all intents and purposes, dead. Remember what the father of the prodigal son said when he got his boy back again? "**This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.**" (Luke 15:24)

But this term lost doesn't just apply to the little band of outcasts who were surrounding Jesus here. Nor is the term "lost" appropriate only

for people whose behavior puts them on the margins of society today. A successful businessman can be lost if he hasn't acknowledged his sin and come to know his Savior. The lost can be a soccer mom who heads the PTA. The lost can be a student with a 4.0 GPA and a raft of awards for good citizenship at school. Anyone who hasn't confessed, "I'm a sinner and Jesus is my Savior," is lost. All of us were once among the lost, before God came to us with his Word and baptism and made us his own.

Early last week the newspaper carried a heartbreaking story from the state of Georgia about a father and his two daughters trapped in floods caused by hurricane Ivan. In the early part of the storm, seventeen year-old Laura Terrill and her 6 year-old sister, Cheyene, had been sailing paper boats in the little stream near their mobile home. But later, when the pouring rain turned the stream into a 4-foot deep torrent of muddy water, Cheyene was swept away. Laura tried to grab her sister but wound up getting pulled in, too. Their father, Rhys Terrill, heard the cries for help. He was able to take hold of Laura, but the raging water had pulled Cheyene into a large drain pipe. Rhys couldn't hang on to Laura and search for Cheyene, too. The little girl was lost in the flood. The newspaper reports revealed something of the father's anguish over his lost little one. Luke 15 shows us that Jesus feels the same way about those are perishing spiritually. He longs to save them. He seeks them with his grace. He yearns to find them.

## **2. Found by grace**

In his parable, Jesus said, *"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?"* This shepherd is Jesus. Jesus isn't merely content to let the lost try to find their way back to him; he goes looking for them. When you hear your Lord describing himself as a shepherd who actively seeks his lost sheep, you're learning something very precious and comforting about your Lord. He doesn't shrug his shoulders and say, "Well, that's only one lost sheep out of a hundred. One per cent loss? That's not too bad." To Jesus, one single soul is of infinite worth. In a world of violence where death and destruction are nearly constant, where life seems cheap, Jesus is concerned for every single soul. He doesn't write people off. **"He is patient with you,"** the Bible says, **"not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."** (2 Pet. 3:9)

As prominent as the word “lost” in this chapter is the word “found.” The shepherd found the lost sheep. The woman swept her house and found the lost coin. The father’s wandering son returned home. He’d been found. The Bible has numerous real-life stories like this. The dying thief was found just hours before his life was over. The vertically-challenged tax collector, Zacchaeus, was found. So was the fierce persecutor of the church, Saul, later known as Paul. And we, too, by the grace of God have been found. We delight in singing the famous words of John Newton, another recovered sinner, “***I once was lost, but now am found.***” The apostle Peter put it this way: “**You were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.**” (1 Pet. 2:25)

There are Bible passages that tell us to seek the Lord. “**Seek the LORD while he may be found,**” from the prophet Isaiah comes to mind. But in every case where lost sinners have been found, it’s not that they found Jesus but that Jesus found them. He seeks us with the laser-like accusations of his law, opening our eyes to the fact that whatever righteousness we can muster on our own is far from sufficient to get us to heaven. He seeks us through the circumstances of our lives, positioning us in proximity to people who care enough about us to share God’s greatest gift—his Son—with us. But most of all God seeks us with the message we call the gospel, the good news. This is good news because it tells us we aren’t beyond hope. We don’t have to remain outcasts. Jesus came to this world to keep God’s commands for us. More than that, he came to make the full payment for our sins by dying on the cross for us. Having risen from the dead, he now lives to assure us of our new status. We are his forgiven people. Members of his family. He puts a ring on our fingers and shoes on our feet.

How blessed it is to be found by God’s grace! Why as we see here in Luke 15, it’s cause for rejoicing. The shepherd calls his friends and neighbors together and says, “**Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.**” (Luke 15:6) The woman sweeps her house and finds her lost coin and calls her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her. And can’t you just hear sound of the joyful music and smell the aroma of the roasting beef as the father celebrates the return of his lost son? As Jesus says here, “Heaven rejoices **over one sinner who repents.**” (Luke 15:7)

### **3. Heaven rejoices**

We’re familiar with many of the things that angels do. They serve as God’s messenger service, like Gabriel when he came to Mary. In a

variety of ways, angels serve believers. Time and again the Bible says that angels watch over us, protecting us from harm. But did you know that angels are also keenly attentive observers of the unfolding of God's plan of salvation? Here in verse 7 it says there's rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. A bit later in verse 10 it tells us more specifically, **"I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."** I'm not sure whether I should picture that as the "Hallelujah Chorus" or as high fives and joyful slaps on the back, but there's no doubt that God and his angels find great joy in the recovery of a single sinner.

That joy doesn't have to be restricted to heaven, though. Each of you has a story to tell about how your Savior sought you and found you. Your status as a child of God is cause for rejoicing! Christianity is a religion of joy, because we have no end of reasons to ponder the wonders of God's grace to us and to others. And it may be that through your efforts today or down the road, as you invite friends and neighbors to share with you in the joy of being saved, that there will be more cause for rejoicing—both in heaven and here on earth as the lost are found.

In another place here in Luke's Gospel, we learn that Jesus, because of his propensity for seeking the company of sinners, earned the title, "Friend of sinners." It was meant as a derogatory title. But what those who didn't really know him intended as something derogatory, we find comforting. Yes, Jesus is the friend of sinners. That means he's my friend and your friend, too. Amen.