

“Search and Rescue”

Luke 15:1-10

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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This morning, Luke takes us to the Lost and Found section of his gospel when he shares two parables Jesus told which describe people looking for something they lost. The first is about a shepherd looking for a sheep which wandered away from the fold. The second is about a woman who turned her house upside down searching for a coin. Both found what they were looking for and were so happy about their good fortune they threw a party to celebrate.

Luke concludes each parable by telling his readers this kind of exuberant celebration occurs in heaven whenever someone who has lost his way has been found and restored to the place from which he was excluded. I am not surprised Luke does this. Throughout his gospel, he is the champion of the least, the last and the lost. He always pulls for the underdog and notices the runt in the litter.

You know what part of these parables intrigues me the most? It is where Jesus puts the emphasis.

It is not upon the objects which have been lost, though they are important, or why they were out of place. Jesus draws our attention to the frantic and relentless efforts of this shepherd and this woman to find the sheep and the coin.

Both characters in the stories go to extreme measures to find what they have lost and do not quit until they have found them. Neither was content to cut their losses and move on, in spite of the fact the shepherd had ninety-nine sheep safely in the fold and the woman had nine other coins. Both were determined to find what they lost and were ecstatic when they did.

Why do you think Jesus told these parables? First of all, he was responding to his critics, the scribes and Pharisees. They were grumbling because Jesus associated with people they deemed unworthy of his attention, sinners and tax collectors.

Sinners were imperfect people who did not maintain the ritual purity practiced by the Pharisees, and tax collectors were considered traitors and scoundrels since they worked for the

Roman government. Surely, Jesus had been taught to have nothing to do with these people as a way of shaming them and maintaining his purity.

I am sure Jesus had been taught this, and he watched as these religious leaders would even gather their robes tightly around their bodies to keep an unworthy sinner from even touching them in a crowded place. However, Jesus rejected this idea and chose to make room in his life for people from all walks of life.

Jesus knew the only way to influence people and introduce them to a God who loved them and wanted to help them be the best person they could be was to spend time with them listening to their stories. This was why he was a man of the people who walked the dusty roads of Palestine going from village to village, engaging people in conversations and telling them about this God who wanted to help them deal with their struggles and live up to their potential.

At some point, Jesus had to decide who would be included in his life, and what role outcasts would play in his ministry. Would he spend time with them and serve them or cast them further out? He made his decision to include all people in his life and ministry because he firmly believed this represented the heart and will of God.

It appears the second reason he told these parables was to help his audience to understand the importance of community. Jesus knew everyone needed to be a part of a healthy community which says, "We are with you," as opposed to an exclusive community which says, "We are not with you."

No one needed to be alone in a scary and dangerous world. Only love casts out fear and broadens the boundaries of a community to include everyone. Selfishness, suspicion, hate, prejudice, arrogance, a feeling of superiority, a critical spirit and a judgmental attitude will restrict those boundaries and exclude the very people who need community most, the marginalized and the maligned.

Jesus saw this happen many places he visited, and it broke his heart. This was why he spent his life building bridges of goodwill, understanding and reconciliation between people to span those grand chasms which separated neighbors. Finding any person living outside a caring community became his mission and purpose, much to the chagrin of the religious brokers.

For Jesus, though, it was not enough for people to be nice and polite to each other. The kind of community he wanted to build demanded much more of people than this.

He wanted people in a community to reach out to those who were not included "in" by the prevailing attitude of his time and welcome them into the fold. He urged them to get rid of anything in their lives which contributed to another person's "lostness," especially a smug,

holier-than-thou attitude which promoted division and strife. He encouraged them to notice when someone was missing from their family or circle of friends and to make it a priority to go find them and bring them back.

On January, 13, 1996, nine-year-old Amber Hagerman was abducted while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas. Round-the-clock efforts by her family and local authorities to find her alive were not successful. Four days after she was taken, her body was found in a storm drainage ditch.

Later that year, the Department of Justice issued what we now know as the Amber Alert. As soon as the authorities have been notified a child has been abducted, the information is distributed to media outlets and government agencies all over the country. In the last seventeen years, many children have been found and saved because of this alert system. Just last month, sixteen-year-old Hannah Anderson from San Diego was rescued after hikers saw her and her abductor, James Lee DiMaggio in Idaho.

Who needs you to notice their absence from your family, circle of friends, neighborhood or this community of faith? Who has fallen by the wayside and needs you to leave the comfort and safety of your community to find them and bring them back home? Who needs you to care enough about them to reach out to them? Will you do it?

Did you see the movie, *Get Low*, starring Robert Duvall, Bill Murray and Sissy Spacek? It was in theaters about three years ago. Many believe this was one of Duvall's finest acting jobs, and he was awarded the Hollywood Award for Best Actor in 2010.

Duvall played the part of Felix Bush, a crusty old hermit who lived in a cabin in the Tennessee backwoods and had the nasty habit of pretending to shoot anyone who trespassed on his property.

For forty years, Bush lived in a self-imposed prison because he never recovered after the love of his life died in a house fire. He withdrew from friends and neighbors, wallowing in anger over her tragic death and guilt over his inability to rescue her.

What makes this story so tragic is underneath this tough exterior was a man with a good heart who longed for understanding, redemption and companionship. Deep down, he did not want to live in exile, but he had no idea how to plug back into his community. His heart ached for someone to listen to his story and extend the hand of friendship.

Our world is full of people like Felix Bush, outsiders longing to be a part of an affirming and encouraging community. You and I know some of them personally.

We have not been called by God to criticize and condemn them, nor can we ever give up on them. We have been instructed to go find them and extend the hand of friendship.

Who needs you to try again this week to reach them? Is it a family member or dear friend? Is it a schoolmate or coworker? Is it a neighbor or fellow church member?

A few years ago, an earthquake almost flattened Armenia, killing over thirty thousand people in less than four minutes. In the midst of the devastation and chaos, a father left his wife securely at home and rushed to the school where his son was. The school building was in shambles.

Tears filled his eyes as he looked at the debris. He knew he had to try to find his son, though. Years earlier he promised his son, "No matter what, I'll always be there for you." He went to the portion of the building where he believed his son to be and started digging. Many came and tried to pull him away, thinking his efforts were in vain. He refused to listen or let them distract him.

After a day of digging, he pulled back a boulder and heard his son's voice. He screamed his son's name, "Armand!"

Immediately, he heard his son say, "Dad, it's me. I told the other kids not to worry. If you were alive you would save me, and when you saved me you would also save them. Dad, I knew you would come!"

That day, fourteen hungry, thirsty and scared kids were reunited with their families all because of the valiant efforts of a loving father.

Who needs you to love them this much?

Who loves you this much and has gone to extreme measures to reach you? Is it time for you to take their hand and go back home?

I hope you will and can only imagine the party which the angels in heaven will throw as they watch you.