

## Seeking the Lost with Love

### Luke 15

#### Introduction

In the fifteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus tells three parables in rapid succession. The first is about a lost sheep, the second is about a lost coin and the third is about a lost child. The placement of these parables next to each other is no accident. Jesus is trying to reinforce and deepen an important point about how we are called to live together.

We have not yet taken Jesus' lesson to heart. Our society's values are not yet Jesus' values.

We value efficiency. *Who has time or money to address the needs of one struggling child when there's a whole classroom of children doing just fine? She's just too difficult; it's not worth it!*

We believe that out of sight is out of mind. *What lost sheep? Whose coin? What missing son? What two million plus people behind bars in America? I didn't see them today, so I'm not thinking of them today.*

We value retribution, behaving as the son who stayed, prizing abstract fairness over genuine equity. *Why should he get a welcome feast? That child acted out; she deserves to be punished long and hard for what she's done! He broke the school's rules and knew what he was doing; why shouldn't he go to jail for that?*

We say efficiency, disappearance, retribution.

Jesus says something else entirely.

This conflict of values is one of the reasons why the school-to-prison pipeline continues to flourish and why children and youth continue to suffer for our sins.

We study Luke 15 so that we can open our hearts and minds to the countercultural values of Jesus Christ, so that we may truly become disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

"If somebody fights in a [traditional school], that's ten days automatic suspension," Leila said. "That's two weeks of school that you already missed, and so now you're playing catch-up. So that's already unfair. But when you get into a fight, they don't solve the situation. They just say, 'You go home for ten days, and *you* go home for ten days'...instead of trying to really figure out why did y'all fight and what's going on." – Excerpt from *Pushout* by Monique Morris



## Opening Prayer

*Dear God, we confess the ways that we have ignored You and ignored Your children. We have resisted your transformative justice in favor of our more narrow notions of fairness. We have acted like love and justice are scarce commodities, pretending that more for someone else means less for me. We repent of our wrongdoing. We ask that You open us today, that we may hear anew Your word, and in the hearing, be reshaped towards Your likeness. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

## Bible Study

Today's Scripture is lengthy, so we will read it in four parts, with a few questions after each section and then some lengthier questions at the end.

### **Part 1: Lost Sheep**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So he told them this parable: "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 he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 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.' 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." (Luke 15:1–7)

## Discuss

Why might the tax collectors and sinners have come to hear Jesus? What in Jesus' message may have appealed to them?

The Pharisees and scribes accuse Jesus of welcoming tax sinners. Why might the Pharisees and scribes have been reluctant to welcome sinners?

In the story, the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep in the wilderness to go after one missing sheep. What are the reasons for this? Imagine you're in the flock. How might the 99 sheep feel? How might the one? Imagine you're the shepherd. How would you decide whether to leave the 99 and go after the one, or abandon the one and stay with the 99?

Why might there be greater rejoicing over one who is lost and then found?

Have we ever been "lost"? What did it feel like? Who found us and how?

Having considered the lost sheep, we turn now to the story of the lost coin, as Jesus' parable continues.

## **Part 2: Lost Coin**

“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? 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.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15: 8–10)

### Discuss

In the story, the woman searches and sweeps carefully for one silver coin and finds it. In this passage, the woman responds in the same way as the shepherd responded, gathering friends and neighbors to rejoice with her having found what she had lost. Have you experienced such a moment of rejoicing when finding something, like a lost coin or a lost animal? What was it like?

Our next story takes this to a whole new level, as it is not an animal or object that is lost, but a son.

## **Part 3: Lost Son**

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on

his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:11–24)

### Discuss

Imagine that you're the younger son. You are doing a self-inventory. What mistakes have you made?

Now take a moment in silence to do a real self-inventory as yourself. What mistakes have you made? *(Depending on the feel of this group, you may or may not want to invite personal sharing aloud. Be sensitive to the room and keep this optional for all participants.)*

Scripture says that the younger son "would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating." Have you ever hit such a low? How did it feel?

Scripture says "no one gave him anything." Why not?

What might have made it hard for the younger son to go home? What was he expecting?

This son's father could have punished him, shamed him or refused him. But he didn't. How did his father respond? Why did he respond that way? How might it have felt to the son?

### **Part 4: Lost Son, Continued**

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" (Luke 15:25–32)

## Discuss

The elder son resents what he deems to be unfair. Instead of punishment, the younger son is getting a warm reception and additional attention and support. What do you think the message might be to the Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling about Jesus' welcome of sinners and tax collectors at the start of the chapter?

There are plenty of "older brother attitudes" out there still today. How and where do we see this resentful older brother dynamic playing out in our own lives and communities? Why is it sometimes hard for us to see others forgiven and welcomed home?

How and where do we see this resentful older brother attitude play out in our policy landscape? How does this contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline?

The father says, "we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life." This text talks about rejoicing three times. There is an incredible depth of joy in the lost being found again. In what ways does this text teach us new ways to experience finding those who are lost or being found if we ourselves are lost?

## Making Connections

Think about how children going through difficult times experience the systems and people around them. Which systems and people do children and youth experience to be safe and helpful? Which systems and people are unsafe and/or harmful?

What would it mean to apply Jesus' ethic of special love for the lost child in our classrooms? In our courtrooms? In our communities?

## Creative Thinking

Break into groups of three or four people. Work together to write a fourth parable — as though Luke 15 continued — taking Jesus' parables as your model. Only instead of talking about a coin or a sheep or a prodigal son among the swine, you're talking about a child, setting your story in today's context: a classroom, a community program, a principal's office, a youth group or some such contemporary setting. Write your stories. Share them with the larger group. What do you notice?

While we aren't just "making up Scripture," writing in a way that explores modern-day continuations of Jesus' parables may help us practice thinking in Jesus' voice.

## Reflecting Back

What values do we see in the parables of Scripture? How do those stand in contrast to the values of our current society? How can we be agents of change?

## Life Application/Mission Focus

*Note: If you are able to do some research in advance, this is a great opportunity to bring in a leader — a model “coin finder/sheep finder/struggling child-nurturer” — to share their story and help your group explore some of the heart strategies. If you are not able to do so in preparation for the Bible study group meeting, consider assigning this as homework and inviting group members to come back and share what they learned at your next session.*

Who are the organizations and individuals in your community who are particularly gifted in supporting children and youth going through difficult times? How do they do it? What practices allow them to go beyond just reaching out to really connect and support youth? How do they relate to children and youth? What do they do? What *don't* they do? What do they do to prepare their heads and hearts to better support children and youth? Invite them to join your study group and share their stories. Allow time for a Q&A.

## Including and Inviting Others

Consider inviting volunteers from your youth and/or children's ministry teams to join you for this session. It is a wonderful opportunity to learn together.