

God's Heart

Introduction: Recently, I heard a message by Andy Stanley where he talked about and talked through an amazing thing about Jesus that I'd like to share with you this morning.

And that amazing thing about Jesus is this: even though Jesus was a religious person in his day, he didn't spend all of his time with the religious people of his day. Even though Jesus was a righteous, pure and moral person in his day, he always tried to hang out with and get in front of unrighteous and impure and immoral people of his day. And even though Jesus claimed he was God, he didn't spend a whole lot of time with the godly people.

That's amazing. But that's also a bit odd and very challenging to me because you'd think that the most religious, the most righteous and the most godly person to ever walk the face of the planet would have sought after and connected best and most often with the most religious, most righteous and most godly kinds of people. You'd think that Jesus being the righteous and godly person would have insulated himself with others who were religious, righteous and godly. But he didn't.

In fact, in Jesus' day, the most irreligious, the most unrighteous and impure and the most ungodly liked him. They flocked to be with Jesus. And even though they knew he was in a different category and they knew they didn't live like him and they might never be like him, that didn't turn them off. They weren't embarrassed or put out by him in the least.

And even though they probably thought, **“If you only really knew me, if you only knew what I just got done doing, if you only knew the kind of stinging conversations I have with others in my head, if you only knew what I did during Spring Break at the Sea of Galilee, if you only knew who I really was, then who knows what you'd say or do to me.”** Even with all of those thoughts and feelings of guilt swirling all around within them, even with all of that, they were irresistibly drawn to Jesus. People who were nothing like him flocked to be with him and in that, they wanted to hear what he had to say about God and faith.

Really the people who got ticked and were irked by Jesus were the religious people of his day. The religious people of Jesus' day were the ones he got in trouble with because they didn't like that Jesus kept pursuing people who were nothing like him. They didn't like that Jesus kept insisting on seeking out time and relationships with the irreligious, the unrighteous and impure and the ungodly people of his day.

And now, fast-forward your thinking to today. Today is Sunday, if you haven't guessed that already. And today, there are millions upon millions into the billions of people who are gathering together in littler groups like us. There are billions of religious wanna-bes and righteous and pure wanna-bes and godly wanna-bes like you and me gathering together as churches all over the planet.

And at least in our area here where religious people get together, many of the don't-wanna-be religious, don't-wanna-be righteous and pure, don't-wanna-be godly people don't want to be with us. In fact, they don't want anything to do with us. They don't like us much. Maybe it's a giant misunderstanding. Maybe there are some good reasons on both sides.

But that's odd because the church, the gathering of people who follow Christ is supposed to be the closest encounter anybody could have with Jesus Christ on planet earth. The church, not just me alone or just you alone, but the local church is the body of Christ, the physical representation of Jesus Christ on earth. I mean, we're supposed to be the eyes, the ears, the hands, and the feet of Jesus so that when anybody comes into contact with us, it would be the closest thing to coming face-to-face with Jesus himself on planet earth.

And yet, the very same kinds of people that flocked to Jesus don't want anything to do with you or me. For some reason, we aren't having the same effect on people as Jesus did. It's not an indictment on us or GracePoint or the church in general. It is just a curious observation.

So why were the people who were nothing like Jesus so irresistibly drawn to him? And maybe even more importantly, why did Jesus seek them out?

Maybe you're here this morning and you're just checking God out and processing who Jesus is. Or maybe you've come because you got invited or someone dragged you here. Or maybe you're here because you're thinking about coming back to the church because you've been gone for a long time.

I don't know what you think about me and the rest of GracePoint, but you would have loved being with Jesus. You would have had no embarrassment, no intimidation and no reservation with being with him even though you could see and experience his goodness that were on levels you never hoped to reach and in that you'd want to hear his penetrating words about God and faith.

So why were people who were nothing like Jesus so drawn to him? And why did Jesus intentionally seek them out?

And I'm convinced that if you and I will take some time to wrestle with this, if we will take some time and thought to understand Jesus' reasoning and motivation, then we might just recapture some of that irresistible draw in our day that he had when he roamed the earth.

So let's take a look at Jesus' reasoning in Luke 15. If you have your Bibles with you, I'd like for you to turn there with me to Luke 15:1.

A Lost Sheep and A Lost Coin: Notice as this scene plays out what I described earlier about the irreligious and the disenfranchised with God flocking to be with Jesus and listen to him and the religious people getting mad at him for it. READ LUKE 15:1-2. The irreligious and disenfranchised with God flocked to hear Jesus and the religious people muttered and grumbled about it behind his back.

But Jesus is going to answer his critics, the religious people. He knows the whispered accusations without them even being voiced to him.

So Jesus answers the accusations. But he doesn't do it with a list of reasons like some lawyers or check a poll like some politicians. He does it as a storyteller. He launches into a section of three stories called parables to explain why he sought out people who were nothing like him.

Now, parables are a very special kind of story. They weren't just anecdotes or clever and entertaining tales. Parables were simple analogies about spirituality and reality and God. And so each set of characters represent a person or a group of people with a certain perspective or experience of life. And since this is Jesus, one of the characters will represent God. Let's look at the first two parables here.

Story number one is about a sheep that goes missing. Look at verse 3. READ LUKE 15:3-6. They've heard of this situation that a modest sized flock of one hundred has one sheep go missing. And even so, it's only 1% of the portfolio or the checking account. But hey, that's still a sizable chunk, so that lost sheep meant a lot to that shepherd.

And since shepherds frequently roamed together, the shepherd probably leaves the other ninety-nine sheep with some of his other roaming shepherd friends, and searches high and low for this one lost sheep. He went over rough terrain and hills and rocks. He searched in crevices, caves and caverns. I mean, he looks for that one lost sheep with the same passion that we look for our missing car keys or that missing remote control.

And after that shepherd scoured the land looking for that lost sheep, he found it and with elation he takes that sheep and puts it on his shoulders and brings it back to the flock.

And when that lost sheep is returned to the flock and to the shepherd's care, the shepherd throws a party with his friends and shepherd friends and neighbors to celebrate that the one lost sheep was found and restored to the flock and shepherd.

And Jesus takes that picture and points it to God in relation to people who have a busted up relationship with him. Look at verse 7. READ LUKE 15:7. One person who comes to God in faith and repents from their sin causes all of heaven to erupt with a party just like when a shepherd finds and restores his lost sheep to the flock.

Story number two is about a coin that vanishes. Look at verse 8. READ LUKE 15:8-9. Another common situation where a woman has lost a coin. She's a peasant woman and these ten coins are quite possibly the only things of value that she owns in the world. Her dad gave her these ten silver coins as financial security in the case of a rainy day. And she lost one of them, which is 10% of her financial security, her 401 (k). The loss of just one coin threatened her financially.

But even more than that, these ten coins were her dowry. Her dad gave her these ten silver coins so that she had something to offer a potential marriage suitor. Her dad gave her these ten silver coins as what she would bring to a marriage and she would keep them even if the marriage dissolved. So to lose one of them might be like losing the diamond in an engagement or wedding ring today. The permanent loss of just one coin could have devastated her emotionally. The stakes here are a bit higher than just one sheep. And it is no stretch to say that that one coin meant a lot to that woman.

So she turns her house upside down. She takes a lamp all around the house hoping against hope that she might catch a glimmer of light shining off that coin. She takes a broom and sweeps in the deep crevices of her floor hoping against hope that she might sweep that coin and hear "clink" when it ricocheted in a floor crevice.

She looks for that one lost coin with the same passion and determination that we would look for a missing diamond from a wedding ring, or our missing PIN number to the ATM or those misplaced Red Sox tickets. Okay, maybe not as passionately this year. But you get the point that this woman search feverishly for her lost coin. And in the end, somehow, somehow, she finds that coin. And when that coin is returned to the other coins, the woman calls her friends and neighbors to celebrate that that one lost coin was found and restored to her.

And Jesus takes that picture and points to God in relation to people who have a broken relationship with God. Look at verse 10. READ LUKE 15:10. One person who repents, who by faith and trust in Christ turns from pursuing a life centered on themselves to pursuing a life centered on God makes heaven erupt with applause, shouting, singing and partying.

You see, in these first two stories or parables, there are two sets of characters in each of them. There are the owners, namely a shepherd and a woman, who represent God and his heart. And then there are the lost items, namely a sheep and a coin, who represent people who are disenfranchised with God and have a broken relationship with God.

And just as a sheep meant a lot to that shepherd and a coin meant a lot to that woman, so also people who are separated from God by their sin mean a lot to God.

In fact, the worth of that lost item is so high that just as it compelled a shepherd to search all over for a lost sheep and a woman to turn her house upside down for a lost coin, so also God goes for an all-out search for those who are far from him. God came to earth as Jesus Christ to seek out and search for people who were far from him, who had separated themselves by their sin from God.

And then just as a massive and raucous celebration ensued when that sheep was found and when the coin was found, so also when a person far from God comes to him through Christ, a heavenly, cosmic, raucous, celebratory party erupts over them. Whenever a person is restored to God heaven instantly gives a standing ovation.

You see, the point of these two parables is that God prizes people who are far from him. That's why Jesus did what he did. God doesn't just tolerate people who are far from him. He doesn't just wring his hands together in anticipation of zapping people who are separated from God and live outside the family of God. People far from God matter to God.

You've never looked eyes with anyone who is far from God that doesn't matter to him. That waitress or waiter at the restaurant you frequent matters a whole lot to God.

That bank teller who takes your deposit matters a whole lot to God.

That person who sits in the cubicle next to you matters a whole lot to God. That person who sits in a desk next to you in school or has a locker near you matters to God.

That telemarketer who calls during dinner matters a whole lot to God.

That difficult boss, irritating neighbor, close friend and golf buddy, they all matter a whole lot to God.

God prizes people who are far from him, who live outside the family of God, who are separated from him in their sin like a shepherd does a lost sheep and a woman does a lost coin.

But these two stories raise all kinds of questions and difficulties primarily because sheep and coins are vastly different than people. I mean, how exactly can people be lost like that one sheep or that one coin was lost? And what does it look like for people to be restored like that lost sheep or that lost coin was restored?

A Lost Son: So before anyone in the crowds can ask any questions like these, Jesus launches into a more elaborate example story to make his point personal to the religious people listening and to the irreligious and disenfranchised with God.

The story is about a father who has two sons. And one day, the younger son came to his father and asked for his share of the inheritance. He didn't just want the rights to it. He wanted to cash out of his father's life. In effect, this younger son is telling his father, "**You can't die fast enough for me.**"

In our day, that would be offensive and hurtful with feelings of deep rejection. But in Jesus' day, that would not only be that, it was also absolutely outrageous. If this were to really happen in Jesus' day, that Jewish father would say something I heard that Bill Cosby would say to his children, "**I brought you into this world and I can take you out of it.**" The normal father would have taken his son down a couple of notches and maybe even taken part of the estate away.

But not this father. In wisdom and love and patience, this father does the absolutely surprising opposite. The father lets his son go his own way without coercing him to stick around. He lets him cash out and cash out of his relationship with him.

So the younger son takes all the money that his father had worked so hard to accumulate and takes off. I mean, this is getting worse. This isn't like the tragedy of a child being kidnapped. This is like the tragedy of a child running away because they would rather live on the streets than be with their parents.

This is deeply painful for the father because for all intents and purposes, this son is lost to that father, just like that sheep was lost to the shepherd and that coin was lost to the woman. But this lostness is one of a dead relationship. No contact. No input from the father to the son. No love exchanged between them. The younger son is lost to his father because their relationship is dead.

Then this younger son blows all of his money. He doesn't take a job, but he's the life of the party, night after night after night until he runs out of money. And that's when all of his friends disappear.

So when a famine hits, he's all alone with no money. And he's just desperate for some kind of way to eat and make money, so he takes a job as a day laborer for pigs. And for a Jewish boy, this was rock despicable. It severed him completely from any ties that he would have still had with his hometown because Jews never touched or came near pigs. Pigs were declared as unclean and to touch one amounted to be booted out until they could cleanse themselves.

So the boy worked. It was legal, but it was despicable. Maybe in today's world, it might be like one of you having a son who chooses to play for the Yankees. It's legal, but it despicable in Red Sox Nation. That's where this boy is.

And if that weren't bad enough, he didn't make enough at it. He had so little food that he envied what the pigs ate, carob pods, which would fill his stomach and ease hunger pangs but would do nothing for him nutritionally. This is absolute rock bottom. There is no imaginable place farther for a Jewish boy to go away from the Jewish roots of his father than where he's at.

But the younger son comes to his senses. He remembers life back with his father that even his father's hired hands had it better than he has it right now. So he decides to go back. He'll just tell his father that he has sinned against him and against God. Then he'll only ask to be another hired hand. He won't have the audacity to ask back into the family because he's blown his inheritance and blown it so huge with his father and family.

Look at his father's reaction in verse 20. READ LUKE 15:20-24. This father saw the boy while the younger son was a long way off. I imagine that this father routinely scanned the horizon to see whether his son would return. And when this father saw his son, his compassion and love and value for his younger son wrecked him.

This dignified man strips away all of his dignity by running to his son instead of walking in a dignified and stately pace that suit his position, age and influence. He ran to him. Then he doesn't just touch his pig-spoiled son. He hugs him and kisses him.

And after his son confesses his sin, his father takes his best robe, the one that this father only wore on special occasions and puts it around the boy. He commands that the family's sign and symbol of authority and inclusion, the signet ring, be given to the son. And the father has servants put sandals on this boy's feet. And by doing so, the father put the final stroke on actions that spoke to his complete acceptance of his younger son back into the family and into relationship with him. The younger son is completely restored without any junk or sin or awkwardness or embarrassment between them.

Then the father threw a party that peeled the paint off the ceiling just like the shepherd did over that lost sheep and the woman did over that lost coin. Why? Because his son was lost, but now he's found. He was dead, but now, he's alive. So the father says, **"Let's party and mark that moment."**

Think back to the younger son for a bit and look deeply at the face of that younger son. Do you see your face there?

Maybe some of you have never thought about it before. Maybe some of you have just forgotten where you came from. But the simple reality is this: we all have the face of that younger son.

There was a time in all of our lives where we were cashed out of our heavenly father's life just like that younger son did with his dad. We turned our back on God and his care and his concern. Directly or indirectly, we lived life with an attitude toward God of "**You can't die fast enough for me.**" We built a life centered on pleasure, relationships, popularity, success, or security. And that is what the Bible calls sin.

And when we choose to sin, we entered into a spiritual wilderness with no way out. We wandered from unfulfilling thing to unfulfilling thing searching for something to satisfy that rumbling in our souls. We were far from God. Some of us farther than others, but all of us were far from God. Maybe you're even there right now.

But God is like this father in that he has compassion on us. He saw us from a distance, and so he sent Jesus Christ to earth to die on the cross for our sin and to be raised from the dead. All of it to set us free from the penalty and consequences of our sin and to make it possible that we could be restored into a relationship with God.

Then God sent people to serve us like Jesus would. And then God sent people to speak words to us like Jesus would. And all along God has spoken and wooed and drawn us to himself. That's why some of us are here this morning.

Some of us came here this morning because you have been seeking to get reconnected with God. You know that you are far from God. And I will tell you this: God will forgive you and restore you back into a relationship with him no matter what you've done, just like that father did with that younger son, if you will go to God and simply confess your shortcomings and sin and ask Christ to forgive you of your sin and to lead you in life because he died on the cross for you. You can even do it today with a very simple prayer to God.

And there are still others of us here this morning that came to that place sometime in life where we have done just that. And whenever that happened, whenever any of us turned back to God, heaven erupted with a party. The banner on that party had our name and the angels stood in applause because we were lost, but then we were found. We were dead, but now we're alive to God.

Since God so prizes people who are far from him, take a hold of God's restoration through Jesus.

The Older Son: You'd think that the story ends there because that's where the other stories ended. But remember, I said there was a father with two sons. There is an older son that has been in the background of the story the whole time.

Now, the older son had stuck around his father. He had worked hard and stuck by his father's side. And on the day of this party, the older son is walking in from working in the fields. As he got closer to the house, he heard the music and dancing, so he knew that there was a celebration feast going on because music would typically signal the food. The music was like the dinner bell of a feast.

And the older son scratched his head, "**Hmm,**" he thought. "**That's weird. Today isn't a holiday or a birthday. I wonder what is going on.**" So he asked one of the young servants around what was going on and the servant told him about the party for the younger son who came home. And the older brother seethed and refused to go into the party.

The father gets wind of it and responded to his older son just like he had with the younger. The father didn't smack him down. But the father went to him.

Look at what the older brother said to his father in verse 29. READ LUKE 15:29-30. He's right. All of that is right, but his father is a man of grace and mercy and forgiveness. To a point where it seems unfair and ludicrous. But that same grace and mercy and forgiveness was and is extended to that older son as well.

Look at the father's response in verse 31. READ LUKE 15:31-32. In effect, the father is inviting the older son to join him in the party over the lost son being found.

Let's think about that older son for a bit here. Do you see your face in the face of that older son? In the parable, he represents the religious people. He's the one who's with his father, just like we're with our heavenly father, God through Jesus. He represents the religious wanna-bes and righteous and pure wanna-bes and godly wanna-bes. And there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, it is good.

But the danger of being all of that is that you and I can forget that our father is a God of grace and mercy and forgiveness. And so much so that, he's on a quest, an all-out search for lost people because they stir his heart. And instead of joining him in that, we can spend our lives with our arms crossed not wanting to go into his party for the lost.

I can do that. I can get so wrapped up in being a pastor and being so relationally full with all kinds of other followers of Christ, that I nudge away space for people who stir God's heart, people who are far from him.

I can get so busy in my life and schedule that I never make meaningful time with people outside God's family.

Or sometimes, I am just so plain scared of fumbling over my words or them not liking me that I don't speak up when I could talk to people about Jesus. Or I can just plain forget to pray for some of the lost people around me. And in moments like those, I am like that older brother whose arms are crossed not wanting to go into God's party for the lost. So how about you?

You see, we have that older son's face as well. But here's the good news. God has invited us back into the party. In the parable, it just sorts of ends without telling us what the older son did. Did he go back into the party? Did he stay outside? We don't know. It is almost as if Jesus left it open for us to fill in the answer for that older son.

God has invited us back into the party. He's invited us to join him in his search in the normal everyday courses of our lives. He's invited us to look for and to seek out lost people, people who have a busted up relationship with God and desperately need Jesus Christ so that they can be restored to a relationship with God. Since God so prizes people who are far from him, seek after people who are far from God.

Maybe that means making some room in your schedule to learn about how to communicate your faith more effectively. Later this month, we'll have some training available to teach you how to do it, but make the time if you need to.

Maybe that means cracking open your schedule to some of the lost people who are already all around you like neighbors and friends and co-workers and other students just get together with them for dinner or for lunch or for coffee so that you can get to know them.

Maybe that means getting to know a little bit better the people in the restaurants you frequent or the places of business you frequent so that you might be able to invite them to GracePoint or one of our events.

Maybe that means picking one, two or a few lost people who are around you and praying for them everyday that God would speak to them and draw them to himself and that he would use you to help them take steps toward Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: Since God so prizes people who are far from him, take a hold of God's restoration through Jesus and then seek after people who are far from God.

You see, there's a party going on. God and all of heaven celebrate on scales that we can scarcely imagine. They throw a party so raucous we can only dare to dream about it. And in that party there is the bliss of being found by God and the elation of seeking and bringing other lost people into a relationship with God. There's a party going on.

But you know, we could just stand outside. We could stand outside and listen to the partygoers and listen to the music and smell the great food. But we'd never really experience God fully or the kinds of parties he throws over the euphoria of finding who was lost.

And that's why our heavenly Father has invited us to join in with him by taking a hold of God's restoration and then seeking other people to bring into the party. So go on. Take the risk and join the party.