

Hearing God's Heartbeat: He Welcomes Sinners

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch

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This morning we begin a new series of messages entitled "Hearing God's Heartbeat." We will look at Luke 15 which contains three parables about lost things: a lost sheep, a lost coin and two lost sons. I will use as a resource for these messages a book entitled The Prodigal God by Tim Keller. If you would like to purchase a copy of this book, they are available in the foyer. Let's begin by looking at the context in which Jesus told these parables.

Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴"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? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷I 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.

⁸"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

"The Pharisees and teachers of the law muttered..." What a great word: "muttered."

The dictionary defines it: "to complain or grumble in a low rumbling, threatening sound."

Can't you just hear these self-righteous, arrogant religious leaders muttering about Jesus?

Their muttering evokes a response from Jesus. He responds with three parables about lost things. Over the next several weeks we will look closely at each of these parables. To understand a parable it is helpful to mediate on the images it describes. The first parable is about a sheep, a shepherd and the search. The shepherd and the sheep are not new images in the Bible.

Isaiah 53:6

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;

Psalm 23:1

The Lord is my shepherd.

Generally when we think of these images of sheep and shepherds we picture gentle, fluffy lambs in green pastures beside still waters. It is a restful, tranquil scene. Listen to how an actual shepherd describes taking care of sheep.

“A sheep is a stupid animal. It loses its sense of direction continually. A lost sheep when found tries to escape from its rescuer. It will not follow the shepherd home. When the shepherd finds it, he chases it, seizes it, throws it to the ground, ties its legs together, picks it up and throws it over his shoulder to take home.”

When the Bible says we are like sheep, it is not exactly a high compliment! In fact, it is a spiritual insult. Like sheep we need to be rescued. We cannot save ourselves. When sheep see grass, they go for it. It does not matter how steep the climb or how dangerous, the sheep is determined to get to the greenest grass. After munching on the grass, the sheep looks around and realizes it cannot get down. Without help, it will plunge to its death.

Sound familiar? Your soul feeds on something. We chase after something, no matter how dangerous. We are totally focused on our feeding frenzy: success, money, popularity, pleasure. One day we look up and realize we are lost and about to plunge to our death. For instance, a career is a good thing. But if you rest your heart's deepest hopes on your work, you are like a sheep. Someday you will wake up. You will get fired. Or you will climb to the top of the ladder of success and discover at the top there is nothing there. You will become aware that the meaning of your life is in danger. You will take a spiritual and emotional plunge.

“Like sheep we have all gone astray.” All sheep need to be rescued. They have to be grabbed, tied up and hauled home. If you find a missing dog, it comes to you and will follow you home. A sheep will run away from his rescuer. It contributes nothing to its rescue. The shepherd has to do everything. Like sheep we are utterly lost in sin. We cannot save ourselves. We need a shepherd to save us and take us home. We need someone to live the life we should have lived. We need someone to die the death we should have died. Everyone is lost in sin. If you don't believe you are hopelessly lost in sin, give it time. Some day you will wake on the ledge—in great spiritual danger. From the image of the sheep we realize how hopelessly lost we are.

Another image in the parable is the image of the search. Remember the context of the parable described in verses 1 & 2:

Luke 15:1-2

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

These parables are Jesus' response to the muttering of the religious leaders. They complained about Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them. In biblical times, eating with someone carried far greater significance than it does today. Today, we eat with someone as a gesture of friendliness: "Let's do lunch sometime." It is very casual. But in biblical times to invite someone to a meal was an offer of friendship: "I want to be in relationship; in community with you." This explains why Zacheus, the short little tax collector in the tree, was so thrilled when Jesus stopped and invited himself for lunch. Lonely Zacheus knew this meant that Jesus was offering him lasting friendship.

The religious leaders were dumbfounded that Jesus would eat with tax collectors and sinners. It was clear to them that Jesus was seeking to build a faith community consisting primarily of sinners. For the religious leaders, sinners should be excluded from a

faith community. Faith communities are reserved exclusively for good people. Sinners don't qualify for a faith community.

Jesus is establishing a bold new community. Jesus said there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents. He should know. He came from there! Jesus says: "I have come from a community in heaven that celebrates sinners saved by grace. It does not celebrate righteous people who think they have nothing from which they need to repent."

What is community? The dictionary defines it as: "a group of individuals who have been bonded into a body through an intense common experience." The more intense the experience, the stronger the bond. A company of soldiers who experience intense combat form a strong community. Soldiers who fought together in WW II, sixty-five years later still travel hundreds of miles to be together at reunions. They have shared life and death experiences that have bonded them together forever. Often they will not talk about these experiences to anyone other than their comrades in battle.

In Ephesians 2:1, 4, 6 & 21--Paul says "you were dead in your trespasses in sins...but God made you alive and raised you up with Christ. In him the whole body is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord." We went from death to life and were fit together as a body.

Other religions of the world give you rules and regulations to follow in order to save yourself. The good news of Jesus is for sheep who know they are hopelessly lost and cannot save themselves. "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." (Ephesians 2:8, 9) God comes to us like a shepherd to rescue us. When he finds us and takes us home, it is like dying and being reborn. We go from death to life. I am infinitely lost, but infinitely loved at the same time. God loves you so much he comes looking for you. He will move heaven and earth to bring you home.

We have shared a death to life experience with Jesus. And we share a common bond with everyone who has been rescued by Jesus. This bond is stronger than our race, our gender, our profession. We are all the same. We are all sinners saved by grace. We have been buried with Christ and raised with him. Because of this common bond we fit together like stones in the Temple.

Paul got this imagery from I Kings 6. In the building of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem around 900 BC, the masons shaped the blocks at the quarry. They were brought to the Temple. God ordered that the Temple would be built without the sound of hammer and chisel. There would be no mortar to hold the stones together. They were so perfectly shaped at the quarry that they fit perfectly in place as the Temple was built. If you have been to the quarry—through a life and death experience of God's grace—you have a common bond with others who have been through the quarry and you fit together. This identity factor overrides all other identity factors. All our differences fade into the background of this common experience. This April I will travel to the Congo. I've been invited to teach in the seminary and resource pastors. I've struggled with what I would have to offer. How could my experience as a pastor in the wilderness of southwest Lubbock possibility connect to a pastor's experience in the jungle of Congo? But then I remembered. I have a bond with these brothers and sisters that is stronger than cultural experience. Within 10 minutes speaking through a translator, we will find that we have the strongest bond possible on earth. We have been through life and death with Jesus. Even though our life experiences are vastly different, we will fit together because we've been to the same quarry.

Jesus says, "I am the shepherd." A shepherd has total control of his sheep. Shepherds are not consultants to sheep. Shepherds don't get with their sheep once a week and show a PowerPoint on where to find still water and green pastures. Shepherds spend

24/7 with their sheep. The sheep are totally dependent on the shepherd for every part of their lives; for their survival. When Jesus says, "I am the Shepherd," he is saying, "give yourself to me completely." That is extremely hard for us because it means we have to give up the controls. We have to realize we are hopelessly lost, and we need a shepherd to rescue us from certain death. He takes us from death and gives us life. And places us in a community where we form a strong bond with others who have been through the quarry.

Jesus uses us to find his lost sheep. We are currently engaged in fulfilling Impossible Dreams of making a difference for the kingdom of God. We are making a difference for the physical needs of the hungry and thirsty. We are providing clothing for those who need it. We are providing nets to prevent malaria. We are providing clean water for a village in the Congo. I am so thrilled with the response and the steady stream of compassion that is flowing from our church family.

I also dream that we would impact the spiritual lives of persons who are lost. There are many all around us. During this series of messages I want us to ask God to put on our hearts those persons who need to experience his love and grace. For forty days beginning Jan 13 through Feb 21, I want to encourage you to fast and pray for 4 persons who need to experience God's love and grace. You might fast a full 24 hours or perhaps one meal a week. Have some focused prayer time for these persons. Pray for God to give you an opportunity to invite them to Alpha. This is a class we will offer for 10 weeks on Wednesday evenings beginning Feb 24. It is a safe place to explore the grace and love of Christ. It is a safe place to ask questions.

We will talk more about this in the coming weeks. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He invites us to search out and rescue his lost lambs. Who do you know that needs to experience God's love and forgiveness?