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THE BEST 911 EVER
Luke 15:1-10

In October of last year Glen Ey, a 44-year-old Australia who had taken his boat out sailing, found himself in a dangerous position. He was about 300 miles off the coast when he was battered by a raging storm that broke the mast of his boat. He ran out of fuel for his motor and was adrift in the storm, hanging on for his life. He activated his emergency beacon. Andrew Robertson, captain of an Air Canada Boeing 777 en route from Vancouver to Sydney, heard a request from Australian search and rescue for help locating the lost sailor. Realizing his plane was in the right area Robertson descended from near 40,000 feet to a mere 4,000 feet. He told the passengers what was going on and asked them to look out their windows for a boat foundering in the water. It seemed an impossible task. But using a passenger's binoculars several passengers quickly spotted the yacht. When the captain determined it was the right boat he relayed the location to the coast guard which was able to rescue the lost sailor. How cool to be on that flight and know that you had actually helped save that sailor's life! They went to a lot of trouble to rescue one man. My guess is that every person on board that plane would say that it was easily worth it and far more to save a man's life.

Today I want to talk about someone else who went to incredible extremes to save lives. The person I refer to was Jesus. I think we forget about how committed to rescue Jesus is. We'll see this in Luke 15:1-10 as we continue our study of Jesus tales, the parables of Jesus Christ recorded in the book of Luke.

GOD LOVES INDIVIDUALS

Being a pastor is weird sometimes. I've been a pastor for a long time, but I still remember who I was before I became one. I most certainly did not intimidate anyone. Then I became a pastor and suddenly the game changed. I was the same guy, but people at times began behaving different around me in subtle ways. Laurie relayed to me a comment a friend made to her about how when we were at a party everyone was on their best behavior. It's weird to know that I can help everybody relax at a party by leaving. Somehow just because of my position people feel like the microscope is on them.

That bothers me because that was not the case with Jesus. If you were going to be intimidated by someone he is the one you should be concerned about. Yet look at the first verse in this chapter. It says the "tax collectors and sinners were all

gathering around to hear” Jesus. Luke identifies two groups, tax collectors and sinners. I think of them like professional baseball players. There are pro ballplayers both in the major leagues and in the minor leagues. Those two groups Luke mentioned are sort of like major league and minor league sinners.

Tax collectors were major league sinners. They were pretty much the dog doo of first century Israel, the ones that smelled bad and that you would carefully go out of your way to avoid. All of us have had the unpleasant experience of stepping in one of those gifts that our canine friends leave around for us. That’s a disgusting experience. You want to get it off of you because it stinks and it is gross, but that process is usually a truly revolting one. That’s pretty much how tax collectors were seen in ancient Israel. Even the average Israeli, not just the religious people, held their noses when a tax collector was around and they wanted to get away from them as quickly as possible.

This is understandable. Tax collectors said to their own people, “I could care less about you and what you think. I care about money, and I don’t care who I hurt as long as I get mine.” They also essentially rejected the whole religious system of their very religious culture. As you can imagine this tended to create momentum in their lives in regard to what their society considered “sinful” behavior. The only people who would tolerate them were other rejects and “sinners” so they usually joined them in whatever sin they practiced.

So the tax collectors were the major league sinners. Prostitutes were probably thrown into that category also. But there were minor league sinners as well. These would be the guys who might give a nod to the idea of God, but who pretty much lived their lives without regard to him. They are the guys who partied their brains out, maybe hung out at the bar. They were just guys living their lives as though God were irrelevant.

What is astounding is that these were the people who flocked to Jesus. It is worth noting a small word in verse 1 that is easy to miss. It is the word “all.” The major leaguers and the minor leaguers were “all” coming to listen to Jesus. I doubt if Luke intended that literally. There were probably a few sinners and tax collectors who missed out on the Jesus bandwagon, but his point is that by and large Jesus was all the rage among that set. They weren’t put off by him. They weren’t hoping he’d go away so the party could really get going. They weren’t scoffing at the religious guy and mocking him. They were coming to him in droves! They loved him and couldn’t get enough of him.

It's not too hard to predict what effect that was going to have on the respectable and religious people. They were busy holding their noses and trying to step around all the dog doo people that were collecting around Jesus. They were appalled and disgusted that Jesus would have anything to do with them. It was like Jesus was on a walk and kept looking for doggy doo-doo piles to step in. He seemed to revel in it. Clearly there was something badly wrong with him.

Verse two says the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered "this man welcomes sinners and eats with them." This man deliberately looks for doggy piles! The root of the Greek word that Luke used to refer to their muttering is one of my favorites. It is *gonguzo*. I like it because it is an effective onomatopoeia, a word that sounds like what it means. I can hear the religious guys grumbling under their breath and it sounds like, "gonguzo, gonguzo, gonguzo." It is this grumbling that provokes three parables from Jesus, all of which have the same theme. Today we will look at the first two.

In the first story a shepherd has 100 sheep. At the end of the day when he brings the sheep in he discovers that only 99 return home. One is missing. What does he do? He immediately goes off in search of the missing sheep. He probably sees to it that the others are cared for, but his personal action is to go find the one that is lost. The shepherd fortunately is successful. He finds the sheep and brings it home. He is overjoyed. He throws a party and invites everyone he knows over to celebrate the fact that the lost sheep had been found.

The second story features a woman who has saved up a grand sum of 10 drachmas. A drachma was equivalent to a denarius, which was about a day's pay for a day laborer. Let's call it \$80. So this woman's life savings amounts to \$800. But she discovers to her horror that she can't find one drachma. She only has 9, not 10. What does she do? She turns on all the lights in the house and goes through the place with a fine-toothed comb. She looks in every corner and under every piece of furniture. On Easter Sunday we had an egg hunt at our house. I know our kids are a little old for that kind of thing so we gave them a little incentive. We used those plastic eggs but instead of putting candy in them we put in dollar bills. The kids got into that. They were looking in plants, under cushions on couches and chairs, in bookcases. They were quite thorough. This woman went after that coin with far more vigor than the kids searched for those eggs.

You can understand why because a lot more was at stake. She didn't have a lot of money and this coin represented 10% of her holdings. Fortunately her diligence paid off and to her enormous relief she found it. Once again the result was that she

invited her friends over to celebrate. She was so relieved, so happy that she had to share her joy with her friends. She threw a party and they all rejoiced that she had found her lost coin.

What do these little stories say to us? First, that God cares about individuals. Only one sheep was missing out of a hundred. Yes, but that one sheep mattered to the shepherd. Only one coin was missing, the woman had 9 more. But that one missing coin was huge to her. She could not rest until she found it. That tells us something about God. It may be only one of a hundred, but that one matters to God.

This is a radical concept. In most of the world in the first century human life was cheap. But along came Jesus saying that even one life is precious to God. Every human life matters to him. That one idea has had profound implications for society. Look at places where that idea has not taken root and you will see that life is still pretty cheap there. This is where people get the idea of the sanctity of life. Every single human, regardless of how impressive that person may or may not be, regardless of what they can produce, is important to God.

One big implication of this is that while it is a big deal that God so loved the world, it is enormously important to me that God loves *me*. He loves me enough that he will notice I am missing from the flock and go looking for me. It is not a big deal to the world, but it is a big deal to me that God cares about me as an individual human being.

Many years ago Laurie and I went through the crushing ordeal of having a baby born with a serious heart defect. Our son, Joel, spent the first 6 weeks of his life in the neo-natal intensive care unit at Children's Hospital. He had open heart surgery when he was 6 weeks old. We began receiving enormous medical bills from the hospital and what seemed like every doctor in San Diego County. We were racking up \$10000 a week in bills, which would be over \$22,000 today. We had health insurance but even our part of the expenses was overwhelming at a time when we had no money and we were emotionally exhausted by the stress of the situation. We learned there was an agency that helped cover medical expenses for families with children who had birth defects such as Joel's but that they would not get involved until Social Security confirmed that we didn't qualify for their assistance. So I called that agency and could get no answers. They told me I had to make an appointment and meet with one of their officers. So I did that. I had to go up to their office and sit there among the hordes of people waiting for someone to see me. I was in pain, fearful and frustrated. All I needed was for someone to just say we didn't qualify for their help. I didn't want anything from them. But to them I

was just more grist for the mill. You have to get put into their system and go along with it. You can't be an individual. So fill out the forms, make the appointment, meet with one bureaucrat after another trying to get someone to just say, "no, you don't qualify for our help" so we actually could get some help. To them you are just a 9 digit number. I longed for someone in that bureaucracy to see me as an individual person and just care about me. It didn't happen. Unfortunately that's a common effect modern society. I buy my food from a huge corporation, I do my banking with another enormous corporation, I usually buy my clothes from stores that are part of big conglomerates. My television signal is delivered by a big company headquartered in New York that doesn't care about my personal wishes, I get my electrical power from another huge company, and then there's the government that only knows I exist on April 15 every year. I am not a person to most of the people I deal with, I'm one of thousands or millions. It is quite dehumanizing.

How would you like it if God saw you the same way? The Social Security System is huge, dealing with millions of people. But the Eternal Security System makes that agency look like a cub scout den by comparison. It is way larger. Yet because he is divine and unlimited God is able to know you as a person and care about you. Who you are and what happens in your life matters to the Great Shepherd. That makes our lives meaningful and sacred.

Psalms 139:2-4 says to God, "You know when I sit down and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord." That is astounding. God is familiar with all my ways. Laurie and I have been married more than 33 years. I am familiar with her ways. I can tell when she's not feeling well even before she says a thing about it. I know that if we are busy and she doesn't have something to drink or to eat in a timely fashion she starts to get this look on her face with hollow cheeks and a kind of 1000 yard stare. She needs to eat! I know that when Laurie says, "wouldn't you like some dessert?" what she really means is "I'd like some dessert." I know her better than anyone else in the world knows her. And God knows each one of us infinitely better than that. He is familiar with all our ways. Before I opened my mouth and stuck my foot in it, God knew what I would say. To God you are not just a number. You are a single human that he knows and cares about.

GOD IS A RESCUER

This gets right at the heart of the issue that the Pharisees and scribes had. They considered themselves better than other people, especially sinners. They thought

they were so much better that they regarded “sinners” whether major league or minor league, as worthy only of condemnation and scorn. They saw them for what they were, doggie doo-doo. They had only disgust for them because who cares about doggie doo-doo?

God has a completely different nature. He cares about those people. He values every single one of them, even the so-called sinners. What do you do when you value something and you have lost it? You go look for it. The more you value it the more urgently and persistently you look for it. I remember one day in our previous church when our kids were young that we found ourselves confronted with the parent’s nightmare. After church on Sunday was always time to visit and greet as many people as possible. Our kids got used to sort of having the run of the facility and playing wherever they wanted until it was time to leave. One day when Carissa was about 8 or 9 and Toby was 5 or 6 Laurie and I had finished talking to people and were ready to leave. But we looked at each other and realized the kids were nowhere to be seen. We looked in all the usual places but they were nowhere to be found. We went through all the buildings calling their names but no sign of them. That’s when we began to feel the panic rising. Where were they? Had something happened to them? I had that sick feeling inside and we frantically began looking in places we thought would not be possible for them to be, going back to places we’d already searched. How much do we value our children? There is no limit to how precious they are to us so our search quickly became desperate. I don’t know why, but we had overlooked the obvious. We eventually found them out on the playground.

Being lost is a terrible thing. I’ve not experienced it much in my life, but there have been a couple of times when I recall being lost. When I was 12 our family took the greatest vacation trip of my youth. We traveled across the United States for 2 months. We got lost in New York. We drove into New York City and like classic tourists got totally lost. I don’t remember much about it since I was only 12 and was sitting in the back seat of the car, but I remember the tension. We got lost in the Bronx, a really bad part of town, and it seemed like every turn we took just resulted in us getting more lost. At one point it seemed we were going in circles. I remember the frustration and maybe a little bit of fear mixed in. It was not fun.

I got lost in another way while I was in college. I had a class that I had to complete for my major that proved to be over my head. I was totally lost. I just could not grasp the concepts. I talked to my prof and he asked me what I didn’t understand. I said, “I can’t even tell you what I don’t understand.” I couldn’t ask an intelligent

question because I didn't know enough. It was a bad and hopeless feeling. Being lost means being hopeless, confused, frustrated and fearful.

Imagine being in that place in life. Imagine knowing you're lost, knowing the frustration of that, feeling like no matter what you do it just gets worse, being hopeless and fearing it will never get better. A number of years ago when *Life* magazine still existed it had an issue titled "Who Is God?" Lynda Sparrow, a Hollywood producer, was quoted in it. She talked about the devastation she experienced when she had an abortion, but that later experienced some healing when her daughter was born. The birth of her daughter convinced her that God is real. But here is what she said, "I do believe in God. But I don't know how to be a Jew, and I don't even know what my soul is. I can't make a connection to God. It's a hopeless feeling that I'm all on my own...I'd just like to know for one day what it feels like to hand your life over to God and say, 'Whatever will be, I accept,' to truly have that peace of mind. I want my daughter to know about God."

That woman knows what it is to be lost. But God cares about her, just like he does about every single one of us, like he did about all those doggie doo-doo sinners that were flocking to Jesus. God cares about people who are lost. He values every human life so much that he will go to unfathomable extremes to rescue the lost sheep. That is his nature. He is by nature a rescuer, a Savior God. That is why Jesus walked this earth. He did the unthinkable of leaving the glory of the heavenly realm to live in the squalor, the ugliness, the brutality and violence of this world to rescue lost sheep. We didn't even make the 911 call. That is typical of sheep. Does a lost sheep call 911? Does a lost coin call 911? No they don't but the shepherd initiates as does the woman who owned the coin. God, because it is his nature, initiated the greatest 911 response creation has ever known. In effect he both made the call and then answered it!

Titus 3:3 says "at one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another." That's a depressing description of being lost. But look at verses 4-5. "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." It is the nature of God to save. You could no more keep him from saving than you could keep heat from rising. Saving is what God does.

GOD REJOICES

You would have to close your eyes to not notice the climax of the two little stories Jesus told. In both of them a party was thrown to celebrate the rescue of the lost

sheep and the lost coin. Is that a typical response? I don't think so. Yes, one would be happy, but would one really throw a party because of finding one coin? Several years ago I lost my checkbook. I looked everywhere for it and couldn't find it. That whole day it drove me crazy. Where was it? I began to play disaster scenarios in my head. Some crook had my checkbook and was writing fraudulent checks. I was about to be the victim of identity theft that would bankrupt us. Should I call the bank? That evening I was hanging up some clothes in my closet and happened to look down. There was my checkbook! It was in one of my slippers. How it got there I have no idea. It was a huge relief. I immediately told Laurie and expressed my joy that it had shown up. Did you get the invitation to the party? Oh, wait, we didn't have a party. Sure I was glad I found it, but I didn't throw a party and invite everyone over just because of that.

What does that tell us? Jesus was making a point. The point was that because God cares so much, because each one of us is so important to him, when even one person is rescued and is restored to him, he just explodes with joy and celebration. That is his nature. He is a God who is characterized by joy and rejoicing.

Verse 7 seems a little unusual. Jesus says there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. Does that seem right? I think, and this is not God's word, it's just my opinion, that Jesus is taking a shot at the supposedly "righteous" people who had such disdain for the "sinners." When you read the written word you can't see facial expressions or hear tone of voice. I think if you could you would get the sense of what Jesus meant here. In today's culture I think he would have gestured air quotes around the words "righteous people." In other words, he was saying in a satirical way they weren't righteous at all. Here's why: are there any people so righteous they have nothing of which to repent? The Pharisees and scribes believed that was true of them. But Jesus knew better.

Here's a simple question that will help us see the reality. If there were people who were so righteous they had nothing of which to repent would Jesus have needed to come here and die a horrifying death to save them? No, all he would have needed to do is tell people to be more like those people who have no black marks against them. They're human. If they can do it, so can you. But Jesus did have to die on that cross. And he did so because everybody, even the best of us, even the most religious of us, have stuff in our lives that needs repenting.

Go back to his sermon on the mount. Were those guys all so righteous they never got angry at another person, never thought of anyone as a fool, never lusted after a

woman, never, ever failed to love a person, even their enemies? The answer is no. They needed to repent just as much as the major league sinners did. So God rejoices more over the sinner who repents because the righteous people aren't righteous at all, they're just well-disguised sinners who refuse to repent.

APPLICATION

How should we respond to these verses? What difference should they make in our lives? There are a number of ways they impact us, but I will suggest three.

REJOICE IN GOD'S CARE

One of the things that jumped out at me from these stories is how much God cares about each of us. We are not just a mass of humans. God says a great image for us to think about is that he is our Father and we are his children. Like any of you who are parents, I care about my children individually. They may think it strange, but I now feel like I have 4 children. We have added Anna and Michael to our family, and though I am not their dad, I care about them like I do my own kids. The 4 of them are all very different. Each has his or her own strengths, weaknesses, personalities, quirks, interests, talents. They all matter to me. What happens to each of them matters to me. I pray every day on multiple occasions for Michael in Afghanistan. I pray for peace for Carissa during this time. I pray for Anna as she deals with the radio show she produces and Toby as he goes to school.

I am so limited, but God is not. As I care about my 4, he cares about his millions of children. Just as each of my 4 is important to me, each of his millions is unique and important to him. In other words, to my amazement, I matter to God. I matter a lot. Cory Hahn was a terrific athlete. His dad, Dale, was with him every step of the way as he grew into the athlete he became. Through Tee ball, Little League and into High School at Santa Ana Mater Dei Dale played catch with Cory patiently, worked on his batting swing with him and was there to cheer him on in all his games. He was drafted by the Padres and offered \$300,000 to sign and become professional. He turned it down, choosing to attend Arizona State on a full athletic scholarship. His life changed in his third game at ASU. A freak accident occurred while he was sliding into second base head first. He broke his neck. The result is he is now paralyzed from the chest down. Cory says at times he wondered if it would be better to be dead than to be paralyzed. But he says, "But then I...see my dad and think, 'If he can do it, I can do it.'" When Cory moved back to ASU to continue his education Dale moved into an extended stay hotel near the campus. Together they get Cory ready for his classes each day. Recently they celebrated that Cory is now able to use his once useless hands to wash his hair. After countless days of practicing with his dad Cory is now able to feed himself. Cory

says learning was really messy, but they did it. Together they drive to campus where Dale helps Cory get in his wheel chair. He then wheels himself to class. Dale says, "I see all these college kids running and skating across campus, and then I see Cory just chugging along in his chair, the world moving past him, and I am so, so proud of him." After lunch Dale takes Cory to therapy sessions. Later he takes him home for the night. Cory might hang out with friends until about 11 P. M. Then his dad returns to his room to put him in his bed, puts the television on a timer and slips out saying, "Good night, buddy." Dale says, "when you're a dad, you're a dad forever."

Do you understand that your Father in heaven is, in fact, your Father? That he cares about you more than that? He is there with you every day. You matter to him more than Cory matters to Dale. Maybe you feel like you are damaged goods like Cory. That doesn't matter to Dale. And it doesn't matter to your Father in heaven. This is reason to rejoice. It means when I talk to him about what is going on in my life I don't get a busy signal. Neither is he impatiently saying, "Don't you have anything more important to talk about?" If my kids want to talk about their friends, their hopes, their jobs, movies they've seen, sports they're watching, a trip they hope to take, I love to hear it all. I'm just glad they talk to me. And that's how God feels about us. Isn't that cool? Doesn't that gladden your heart? Doesn't it make you happy that he rejoices, that he throws a party because of you? I love to think of God delighting, laughing, rejoicing. That is who he is!

LOVE GOD

How do you think of God? Do you think of him as a God of joy? Too many people think of him as a sort of brooding, disapproving, scary person. He is a God of joy. He loves to rejoice. He wants you to know that when you put your faith in him he had a blowout of a party. Because he cares so much about us, because he is such a joyful God who delights in us so, shouldn't we love him back? In fact, isn't that what he wants most of all? Jesus said in Matthew 22:37 when asked what the greatest commandment, the most important thing is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

Loving God feels to a lot of us like a pretty esoteric concept. We know what it means, at least to some extent, to love another person. But how do you love God? Pastor and author Stu Weber told a story in an article in *Leadership* journal that helps me with this. He has 3 sons. He was concerned for his youngest because the older 2 were pretty impressive guys. They were both all-conference in sports they played. How do you follow in those footsteps? In addition Stu says his youngest was the most sensitive of the boys. Stu felt he needed to connect with him so they

spent a lot of time in the outdoors together. He says in the wilderness a knife is essential. When you're setting up camp you are always looking for a knife. Ryan, the youngest son, had a knife that sort of became his identity. When they were setting up camp the older boys were always asking Ryan to come use his knife. He became the man with the blade. It was his status. One year Stu's birthday came around. The family was planning a party for him, but before the party Ryan came into Stu's study. He wanted to give his dad his present when no one else was around. He handed it to him. Stu opened it to find that it was Ryan's knife.

It was a powerful moment, an incredible expression of Ryan's love for his dad. Stu didn't need anything his son could give him. He certainly didn't need that knife. But what Ryan had given him was his heart. "Here, Dad. You can have that which is most important to me." God doesn't need anything we can give him. What he wants is our hearts. What he wants is that He would be more important to us than anything else in our lives, even our own status and identity.

REGARD "SINNERS" AS JESUS DOES

If we love God, won't we care about what he cares about? Won't we love "sinners," both the major league and minor league varieties, like he does? If you love someone, you'll love what they love.

Sometimes married people miss this. I've known men and women who resent their spouses interest or show disdain for them. Somehow they don't seem to connect how much they enjoy it when their spouse takes an interest in what they love and realize that street is two way. I have to tell you that I love it when Laurie expresses an interest in sports. And I can see how she brightens up when I express an interest in music, one of her great loves, or when I go shopping with her and avoid communicating to her that we need to get this over with as quickly as possible because it is painful to me.

Does it not make sense, then, if God is so obsessed with people in need of rescue, that to love him we will have that same obsession? We will love people who are badly flawed, we will want them to be rescued, and we will celebrate when they are. We won't see them as doggie doo-doo only to be avoided at all cost, but as individuals who are infinitely precious to our heavenly Father.