

Luke 15:1-10**Fifteenth Sunday Morning After Pentecost, September 12, 2004**

You're like me, aren't you? There've been times when you've lost something and for the life of you, you couldn't find it. I have to confess that seems to happen to me more often now than it did when I wasn't quite as gray. Have you ever heard of Sock Heaven? I've been reading and studying the Bible most of my life and must have missed Sock Heaven in seminary or Sunday School as an adolescent. Jackie is the one who told me about Sock Heaven. I didn't know there was such a place until she told me. Depending what the socks look like, I reckon there could be "Sock Hell!"

Anyway, I have or had this pair of tan socks that I love wearing with a pair of khakis. Problem is I only have one sock now. [Hold up the sock.] The other went to Sock Heaven several months ago after they were washed. For the life of me I can't find that sock. I'm living with hope, though, that a day will come that has been predestined from the foundation of the world when I'll find that lost sock. And I'll be quite happy when I do.

Some loses are humorous. Some aren't. There are loses that are far more complex and devastating than the misplacing of a sock. I often think of those mothers and fathers who've lost children as a result of abduction. There are parents who spend all their lives seeking to find that which has been lost, only to die never knowing what happened to their children. How heart wrenching. My spirit agonizes when parents do find their lost children – lost in this life to death. I am jubilant, though, whenever a child has been found, rescued from the clutches of some demented person. I can't imagine the joy of parents. Which of us would not have a party?

Jesus wants us to have an attitude of joy when something is found that has been lost – especially if that which has been lost and found is a person. I'm referring to a human being fashioned in the image and resemblance of God. His desire is punctuated in the text before us in Luke 15:1-10.

There are three stories in Luke 15 illustrating the joy that comes in finding that which has been lost: a shepherd who finds a lost sheep; a woman who finds a lost coin; and a father who finds a lost son. I preached about the third story earlier this year. What I have discovered to be absolutely incredible about the first two stories is that they are a slap in the face of those people who thought they were "spiritual" and really in tune with God. They serve as a warning and even a proof that those of us who think we are closest to God, may, in truth, be far, far away.

How do I know? I find the answer in what Luke says about the Pharisees and Scribes, the religious people who were spiritual and close to God. I don't think Jesus had a disdain for the Pharisees and Scribes. In fact, I tend to believe He probably identified with them. He saw what they could become and because they weren't "becoming" He was frustrated with them. They couldn't see that God loved everybody and wanted them to join with Him in finding that which was lost. Those spiritual leaders were upset because Jesus welcomed sinners and the unwantables of the culture. He talked with them, ate with them, and even had a good time with them. He even told them the Good News of the kingdom of God. It's still like that in some respects. There are still people who get upset because Jesus welcomes sinners and the unwantables.

When the Berlin Wall came down back in 1989, I just happened to be the President of our Baptist Association's Ministers' Conference in Owensboro. We met every Monday morning, supposedly for coffee and fellowship. Usually it turned into a shouting match between hardcore fundamentalists and hardcore liberals. They literally sat on opposite sides of the tables. Being the theological and political centrist that I think I am and always have been, I sat in the middle to moderate the meetings, attempting to call us back to the reality of partnership every Monday, often to no avail.

As we gathered that Monday morning I came with great joy because the wall had come down. I said, "This will be a great opportunity for evangelism and missions. Why we'll be able to build lasting bridges of relationships with former communists." I continued to share my joy over the fall of the wall. I acknowledged my gratitude to God for the way, I believe, He had worked through four persons to bring it down: Mikil Gorbachav, Ronald Reagan, Desmon Tutu, and Pope John Paul II. Most of the people in there, not everybody, began to rebuke me for such a declaration. My friends, if that's what they were on the left, suggested it was too late and there was no hope because communism had ruined the former USSR, and that my naiveté was foolish. My friends, if that's what they were on the right, suggested this was a Satanic ploy as the Bible clearly taught that the anti-Christ and the Beast would come from Germany and the Soviet Union and I needed to learn how to read the Bible, lest I get "left behind."

My joy turned to sorrow and frustration. I thought I had found common ground upon which all could agree. What I found was the "on the left thinking guys" and the "on the right thinking guys" uniting for the first time against a "center thinking guy!" Guys on the left who had narrowed God into being a powerless Being, unable to radically alter the lives of people under communism and guys on the right whose theology about end-times had been annihilated as a result of the wall coming down. Both sides were telling each other they didn't know how to read the Bible and understand the times. Both sides were pointing their fingers at me, telling me I didn't know how to read the Bible and understand the times. I just sat there, like a good Baptist should. I suppose I could have ruled them out of order, but didn't.

When there was a lull in the conversation, I took out my pocket New Testament and opened it to Luke 15. I said, "Allow me to read something to us from Luke 15 – even though I don't know how to read it, humor me for a moment." I read the first ten verses. Not a word was said. I didn't comment on the words. Sometimes the best thing to do is just let the scripture speak for itself and not speak for it. Then I prayed that God, in His mercy and grace, would forgive me and my friends of our disbelief and our attitudes. It was that "we're better than you 'commies' attitude." I said "Amen" and got up to leave. I heard people on both sides of the table saying, "Where we going to go eat?"

I was convinced that God was searching for that which had been lost behind the Berlin Wall and even in front of the Berlin Wall because there's also a lot of lostness in the free world too. And He had found it. But my friends seemingly didn't want to find it. I left utterly fascinated and shaken. Had I missed the mark? Was I not seeing something? I called two pastors, one a righty and one a lefty. Both told me that I was just too idealistic. I was too naïve. I needed to get in the real world.

As I've reflected on that scene over the years, I've come to the conclusion that I would much rather live an idealized life and at least make an attempt at following Jesus than to live in "the real world" and make no attempt at all to follow Him. I sometimes loose my idealism. Fortunately a loving God, who has shepherdy and womanly qualities, moves me to find, again, my idealism.

Seems to be no different today than it was in Jesus' day when He spoke of a shepherd and a woman, two of those unwantedables, two of those despised persons, two of those simply not the hero or heroine types according to the social and cultural traditions of Jesus' day, especially since both were emblematic of servitude. Yet they championed the cause of joy when they found that which had been lost.

Whenever you lose something that is precious to you and then you suddenly find it after making a meticulous search, or even a haphazard search, there is reason to rejoice. There is reason to party. Don't you think we've lost much today?

We've lost integrity and replaced it with dishonestly and we are to find integrity again.

We've lost devotion to the common good of all humanity and replaced it with an evolutionary mentality that is focused on the survival of the fittest – economically, religiously, politically, socially – and we are to find devotion to the common good of all humanity again.

We've lost partnership with one another and replaced it with “I'll do it my way” and we are to find partnership again.

We've lost respect for some people and replaced it with indifference for those people who aren't like us and we are to find respect again.

We've lost compassion for some, especially the marginalized of the world, and replaced it with coldness and we are to find compassion again.

We've lost humility and replaced it haughtiness and we are to find humility again.

We've lost peaceful composure and replaced it with anger and we are to find peaceful composure again.

We've lost love and replaced it with hate and we are to find love again.

All of these loses disturb me, but I suppose losing love and replacing it with hate disturbs me more than any. I hear so much of “love the sinner, but hate the sin.” I wonder if that's just another cliché that means nothing. It began to dawn on me back in early 1974.

It was at the height of the Watergate Scandal. I was in high school and worked part-time at the local radio station. Being on the speech and debate team, I did a lot of extemporaneous speaking on current events at contests. I devoured news magazines and newspapers. I watched Walter Cronkite. Being employed by the radio station I lived with the Associated Press machine. Having followed all that happened since June 17, 1972, the day of the Watergate burglary, I came to the conclusion that people weren't hating what Richard Nixon had done so much as they were hating him.

The same is true today. Does the name Bill Clinton do anything to you? You just mention that name, not so much what he did, and some, (Dare I say most?), people begin to boil. Think of all the horrible things that have been said about Bill Clinton. It's not hating what he did. It's gone beyond that. As with Richard Nixon, it is about hating Bill Clinton.

Why is that? It's hard to separate the sin from the sinner. I think the Pharisees and Scribes had great difficulty doing that. For them, it was all tied together. For many of us, it is all tied together. So it becomes inconceivable for some that Jesus would go to downtown Atlanta or across our beloved city of Carrollton about three miles to the University of West Georgia or wherever and welcome homosexuals and pro-choicers and anti-Israel people and liberal Democrats and tree-huggers and bug lovers and gun haters and ACLUers. And for some it is inconceivable that Jesus would welcome fag-haters and abortion clinic bombers and pro Israel people and rightwing Republicans and tree-cutters and mosquito killers and NRAers and 700 Club watchers.

On and on I could go. Oh we really have lost so much, haven't we? Tolstoy was right when he said, “Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing him or herself.” If the world, if the nation, God knows these United States, if Georgia, Carroll County, Carrollton, Tabernacle Baptist Church and every Faith Community of Christ, and God knows, your lives and my life are going to be revived in the power of a Jesus who eats with sinners, we're going to have to go looking for and find lost integrity, lost devotion, lost partnership, lost respect, lost compassion, lost humility, lost peaceful composure, and lost love. If we'll look we'll eventually find them. But we are to look.

I had returned from a meeting in Houston some years ago, arriving in Nashville on a direct flight late one afternoon. I looked forward to getting home and seeing Jackie, Emily, and Nicholas. I still had a bit more than a two-hour drive to Owensboro. I got my bag and boarded the shuttle to the parking lot. As persons were getting off the shuttle to go to their vehicles, it suddenly dawned on me that I had no idea where I had parked. Everybody had gotten off the

shuttle, except me. The driver rather roughly said, “Where do you want off?” I said, “Right here is fine.” I got off. The shuttle drove off. There I stood looking for a brown 1986 VW Jetta in a sea of automobiles. I started walking with two bags. Wouldn’t you know it? It started to rain, not hard, but enough to agitate. I walked and walked and walked. The weight of those bags was beginning to bother me. I thought about what Jesus had said about carrying somebody else’s bags. If they asked you to go a mile, then go two. I pretended for a moment that I was carrying somebody else’s bags and God knows I must have walked for at least three miles! After an hour and twenty-minute search, I finally found my car. I can’t begin to tell you the joy I experienced. There was a person a couple of cars down and I shouted, “I found my car! Yippee!” The fellow quickly got in his car and departed. It took a while, but I found that which I had lost.

We’ve lost our way as a world, a nation, a people, perhaps even as a church. We know the way is here somewhere. We are to go looking for it. And if we’re genuine in our search and will become overwhelmed with the urgency to find our way again, eventually we’ll find it. It may take a while, but we can find our way again. And when we do, great joy will come. By the way. In our search for that which is lost, we are at an advantage. You see our Way, is really a Person Who long ago said “*I am the Way*” (*John 14:6*). So it comes down to finding Jesus for the first time or finding Him all over again.

I may never find that sock. But I can find those things that really matter when it comes to being a Jesus type person who welcomes all who find Him. So what have you lost lately? Are you looking for it? Well?

Sermon by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor

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All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version, 1989.