

**Playing Favorites
Luke 15:1-10**

**Good Shepherd Baptist Church
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I understand these Pharisees. You see, I am the second of nine children, which gives me an advanced degree in favoritism. Oh yes, I can smell favoritism a mile away. I couldn't even begin to list the number of times that my parents chose one of my siblings as their favorite when it was so clear to me that I should have been the favorite! Not only could I instantaneously recognize favoritism but I could also create favoritism by bribing the baby with a toy or some playtime in order to make myself the favorite sibling. We were so consumed with the desire to be the favorite that my poor mother never could drive her car into the driveway with one or more of us running out to tattle on the other, all in hopes of securing the "favorite" status before she found out what we had really been up to in her absence. It was amazing how fast she could lock that car door!

That's why I can connect with these guys, because they could see that Jesus was clearly playing favorites with those who were not as qualified and worthy as themselves. They had diligently observed the law but Jesus still unashamedly became friends with unrepentant, unclean, lowlife commoners. Could he not see the fine pedigree, exemplary actions, and exceedingly good looks of these respected teachers of the law? They had dogged Jesus footsteps for many chapters of the Gospel but Jesus had decided to picnic with the losers! I understand why they tried to set Jesus straight, after all playing favorites is only acceptable if I'm the favorite!

Look with me now at verses 1 and 2. Luke writes, "*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.'*" These Pharisees had memorized the scriptures but it was the sinners who had eagerly drank up everyword Jesus said to them. Back in the previous verses Jesus had chastised the Pharisees for becoming salt-less salt and concludes his lecture with the words, "*Let anyone with ears to hear listen!*" Here these lowlife sinners had done precisely what Jesus had asked the Pharisees to do! Yet, the Pharisees didn't rejoice at the obedience of the sinners, instead they were angry at the heresy of Jesus finding table-unity with the sinners. Now, I get this. As a child I only saw inequality when in fact my mother was showing compassion to the child who needed it, namely the sibling I had been mean to! Similarly the Pharisees apparently hadn't understood the story of the banquet that Jesus had just told them in chapter 14. When the guests to the dinner party had declined the invitation the host had joyously welcomed the poor, crippled, blind and lame who had been found on the highways and byways of the town. This second set of guests had accepted the invitation to table-fellowship, not the clean, home-owning first set of guests. "Let those who have ears listen" had been the command and it was the sinners and tax collectors who had listened, who had accepted the invitation, who had been obedient.

I love how Jesus responds to these miffed Pharisees. He doesn't yell or punish them, instead he tells them three stories of loss, longing, reconciliation and rejoicing. It is especially intriguing to me that in these first two, that of the lost sheep and the lost coin, that the Shepherd and the Woman both feel such loss over their missing items. Neither of these two characters are socially prestigious, yet both represent God and the sense of loss that God experiences. The Shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to go after the one and the woman sets aside the nine to seek for the one. If these stories had been told differently, if the shepherd had said, "darn sheep, I guess he'll find his way back to the fold or die." Or the woman had said, "oh well, at least I still have nine dollars to spend," then the value of the lost objects would have decreased. Sure, they would have had the same market value, but the fact that God in God's self feels the loss of these items gives them infinitely more value than their blue book price. God grieves when a person wanders or falls from the community of grace called the church. The lost are still God's beloved.

This is where I struggle with this text, for I have not felt ever felt a loss like this. I have certainly longed for things, but not usually because they are lost to me. I have lost a few good friends due to life circumstances or a falling out, but I have never gone on a prolonged search for them. I don't want to put myself out like that. For one thing, it's painful and uncomfortable. For another, it's uncertain. Who says that the person lost to me will be reconciled or even be kind? Apparently these fears don't stop God. The poor tired shepherd at the end of his day, upon discovering the loss of one of sheep doesn't bemoan his late dinner, but sets out on foot to climb the barren desert hills in search of that one lamb that can't survive on its own. The woman lights her lamp and does spring cleaning just to find a coin! What the Pharisees don't see is that these sinners and tax collectors have infinite worth to God and that Jesus had actually come in search of them. Jesus is playing favorites, and he's not apologizing for it either.

Of course the question arises of the ninety-nine sheep left alone in the wilderness, doesn't Jesus care about them? I think this text has no intention of saying that the one is more important than the ninety-nine or that the sinners are more important than the righteous. This, our course, is precisely what the Pharisees are worried about. Instead it radically confronts the attitude of superiority that these Pharisees have against the sinners and tax collectors. It equals the playing field because it clearly shows that the God loves and longs for reconciliation with the most unworthy people.

The leaders in Ezekiel's day had the same problem with devaluing lost sheep. In Ezekiel 34:10 the Lord brings a charge against them saying that they are consuming the sheep instead of shepherding them. Jesus has juxtaposed himself to these shepherds by painting this picture of the good Shepherd carrying the lost lamb tenderly home. I don't doubt that this juxtaposition was recognized by the Pharisees. Both Ezekiel and Isaiah also give pictures of God gathering together the lost sheep of Israel and tenderly caring for them. Perhaps what these keepers of the law didn't realize was the true identity of the sheep. What Jesus is showing them is that the sheep who aren't lost don't need to be carried home, for they already are home.

Perhaps these guys were even more confounded when they realized that the main characters don't force instant purity and conformity from the repentant. The shepherd doesn't punish the sheep nor does the woman separate the dirty coin from the clean. Rather, after finding that which they had lost and had longed for they reconciled them to the rest of the family. The sheep was returned to its herd and the coin to the purse. It wasn't enough that Jesus had dinner with the sinners and tax collectors, Jesus wanted these Pharisees to have dinner with the sinners and tax collectors. It's like those times I got in trouble for being mean to my sisters and after my mom had comforted them she would tell me I needed to be nice to them, or play with them. So many times I went to my room to pout instead of doing what she had asked, instead of being reconciled to my sibling. What Jesus, and my mom, wanted was a reconciled and welcoming community. These stories aren't about preaching repentance, they are about practicing receiving.

Perhaps if the Pharisees had told this story they would have added a few lines. The shepherd would have thoroughly scrubbed the sheep, removed the dirt and briars, and polished its hooves. The woman would have cleaned, sanitized and polished the coin. Then the ones who had not been lost wouldn't be contaminated by them. If only those sinners with whom Jesus was eating had been ceremonially cleansed beforehand. Sure they've repented, but do they still smell like last night's alcohol or yesterday's ham sandwich? Do they still use colorful language? Homogeneity has not been attained. But Jesus isn't calling for homogeneity, Jesus is calling for welcome.

To make matters even worse the Shepherd and the Women decided to throw a party to celebrate their find. They had called together the whole neighborhood! Jesus had chosen the wrong guest of honor. How could one so dishonorable be honored? Couldn't anyone see that the sheep shouldn't have wandered off and that the coin was covered in dirt and last week's dinner? Yet all of heaven burst forth in joy over the return of these lost and dirty ones.

This is not a past problem, it can't be only attributed to those problem causing Pharisees who follow Jesus through the gospels. This is the struggle we as a church encounter today. It's easy to love our neighbor who lives in another country, after all, they're a long ways away and we don't have to actually figure out how to room with them. But what about the lost that surround us in the unchurched Pacific Northwest? When it comes to the lost people who surround us everyday I fear that too often we/I are like these Pharisees. We're like little coins trying to pull the top of the purse closed to keep out the dirty one, or sheep circled up so tight that the returning one can't actually come in and get warm. It's hard to love the lost, especially if it means giving up our chair right next to Jesus. The shame that these Pharisees carry is that they don't grieve the loss and rejoice at the finding of these lost brothers and sisters, rather they grieve that they've lost some supposed place of importance. They grieve for themselves.

A few months ago a woman visited our church. We think she was probably homeless, and she certainly had some mental disabilities. When she walked through our doors nobody said hello to her. After the service people were anxiously trying to figure out how to get her away from the food table, as if the cheese on it was only for the

baptized. There was no sense of grief for this woman. We should have given her a seat of honor, filled her up, and learned her name, but instead we grumbled and complained and plotted about how to get her out the door.

The problem is exceedingly bigger than just this one woman. We walk close to the good shepherd every day. And every day we see people who have lost hope, who have lost families, who have lost community, who are lying over in a corner hidden under the straw and filth on the floor, and we don't miss them. Too often we don't grieve their absence, and we get jealous when God does. I find myself doing this with the people in my neighborhood. Behind me there is a single mother with 6 children from probably 5 different men. There is a muslim couple next to me and a fundamentalist Baptist family two doors down. I am ashamed to admit that at times I look on those families with judgement instead of the compassionate love that Jesus calls me to give.

I have lived in both the conservative and liberal church world, and neither is free from this problem. The conservatives feel grief, but it's not for those pagan sinners who will burn in hell, it's for themselves because they are ashamed that they haven't evangelized their friends at work. Many of the liberals I know often don't feel grief because repentance is a judgmental word, tainted by the conservatives, and there are many ways to know God. Fortunately for us this is a bi-partisan text. Jesus does not condemn the sinners but rather loves them and desires to be united with them. But neither does Jesus feel that repentance is old fashioned and leave the lost sheep and coin to their own devices knowing that in the end it doesn't matter.

Dr Suess tells an interesting tale of a young boy named Hooper Humperdink. Throughout the book poor Hooper watches as his next door neighbor prepares for his birthday party, he is sad because he is not invited. His neighbor alphabetically invites 26 people, or groups of people, all people who are interesting, famous, and exciting. But not Hooper Humperdink. I guess he's just not the right kind of kid to have around. The circus performers yes, but Hooper no. The neighbor doesn't even seem to care about Hooper's exclusion.

Do we care about the lost? Do we grieve their absence from our communities? Do we grieve that they don't walk in intimacy with God? Or are we so unaware or unable or unwilling or busy with our committee meetings that we have come to believe that their loss actually makes life easier for us? God grieves the loss of people and the subsequent incompleteness of the people of God. God desires to bring in the repentant, even though they aren't all the way clean and even though they might look or smell different than the ones already in the fold. But we are called to a more righteous task than holding the purse top closed. Yes, we are called to grieve the loss of people around us, but we are also part of the party. We're invited to waltz around the dance floor with those who turn towards God. We're invited to jump up and down for joy with heaven's angels because one repentant sheep has walked through the fence.

Jesus loves all people in this world and desires to walk in unity with them. God desires to take lost people, remove them from their isolation and place them in a family

of life. Our role then, if we are one of the righteous, is to cheer the shepherd up that final hill and throw open the purse in anticipation of more sinners and tax-collectors and alcoholics and estranged family members being added to our mix. For only then, only when God really does play favorites with those who are fatigued from wandering the hills alone or lonely from sitting undetected in the corner, only then will we ourselves be complete.