

Storytellers: What Does It Mean To Be Lost?
By Jason Huff
September 12, 2015
Jeremiah 50:4-8,19-20; Ezekiel 34:11-16; Luke 15:1-10

Friends, our final Scripture reading today comes from Luke 15:1-10. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy word. “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable: “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? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I 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. 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? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.””

If you're going to understand anything in this world, you've got to understand the story behind it. Everybody you meet has a story that explains who they are. If you want to relate to a foreign land, dig into its history. If you want to know if the data in a study is flawed or on-target, learn the story of how it was collected. Every culture, whether it gathers around a campfire or a screen, has a deep respect, even a craving, for stories. A sports enthusiast who never reads a novel or watches a play still knows the story of his players, their stats, their teams, their coaches. Deep human interaction requires digging into stories of love, pain, heartache, joy, and grief. I love to tell you what the Bible says; I preach about it every week; I can give you a hundred great facts. But the story I tell you to illustrate those facts sticks with you when the facts fade.

That's why Jesus was a storyteller. In Mark 4:33-34, Jesus taught the crowds in parables, as much as they could understand; in fact, He never spoke to the crowd without speaking in parables. He explained every parable to His disciples, but the Bible doesn't explain every parable to us! He made people think. He made them rack their brains over the Kingdom of God. Sometimes, the parables confused people, intentionally – Jesus didn't want the meaning to be immediately apparent. God alone could provide the meaning to those who sought Him out.

The disciples learned the same thing when they told the world the good news, the Gospel, about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. They told the story of Scripture and the story of Jesus. And people didn't fall in love with an ethical system or their ability to keep it. They didn't risk everything over abstract concepts, even good ones like love or mercy. They didn't give their lives up for a noble cause. They fell in love with Jesus. His story. His sacrifice. His mercy on us. And through Him they come, and we come, to love the Father and the Spirit.

The word “evangelism” makes many of us think of someone preaching on a street corner or a beach or a parking lot to whomever will listen. Most of us think something's wrong with the guy doing it. We find it distasteful, intimidating, not just the idea of doing it but the very act of it. We avoid them not because we don't like the message, not because we don't love Christ, but for the same reason I dodge the guy at Meijer trying to sell newspaper subscriptions – I don't want to be sold something. Our modern society has no tradition of the town crier. We don't hang out at city hall to hear the latest news.

But the need for real evangelism, for sharing the good news of Jesus, is as great as it's ever been. Less and less people forty and under have ever set foot in a church or heard the true gospel presented to them. Fewer still have heard about Jesus in a way that makes sense to them. That's where we come in, and that's why we have to become storytellers.

Stories give us an opportunity to share challenging thoughts in a way we understand. The more we know our audience, and ourselves, the more we can relate the story in ways our listeners relate to. And so, for the next several weeks, we're going to learn the keys of the biblical story, ways to share them, and even motivation to become storytellers in our community.

For us to become storytellers for Jesus, the first step is to know the problem, and for the problem to matter to us personally. Every story worth telling has a dilemma to face. Frodo has to get the One Ring to Mount Doom and destroy it. Luke Skywalker has to destroy the Death Star. Captain Ahab wrestles with the great white whale and his own sanity. The thing about the biblical story is that it's our story, it's real. Its dilemma faces us personally, and it should motivate us personally once our own wrestling with the dilemma is done.

The dilemma of Scripture is this: we, the human race, are lost. What does it mean to be lost? Good question. We hear that metaphor sometimes in church, something about needing to “reach the lost.” But what does that mean? The Bible uses it to mean separation from God. Through our actions, our sins, our rebelliousness against Him, we are no longer close to Him. In fact, we've wandered off so far that He's nowhere on the horizon. He is off our radar. We are distant from Him.

The thing about being lost is, once you find any coordinates you know, you are no longer lost. You might be a long way from where you parked your car or staked your tent, but you're not lost because from where you are, you can figure a way back again. Being lost spiritually is the state of having no idea how to get to any point you recognize to get to somewhere you know.

The Old and New Testament call us lost sheep. Sheep have a habit of wandering off, and when a shepherd herds a flock, there are a lot of them to keep track of. A lost sheep is in danger because it has almost no way to protect itself. Anything hungry and fast enough can make short work of a sheep. That metaphor was something that Jesus' listeners understood. Israel's working class used lambs and goats for wool and milk, and very occasionally food; they saw this most every day. They all got it.

There are three key thoughts I want us to leave with tonight about being lost spiritually. The first one is this: *it applies to every human being*. Tomorrow, when you're out mowing the lawn or at the grocery store or visiting with family or driving somewhere, take a good look at the people you meet, you pass, even those you see casually. Remember this: *every last one of them either was lost or is lost*. Nobody is outside of that qualification.

It started with Adam and Eve. They were made for the garden of Eden, but when they sinned, they were booted out. When they left, they were lost, homeless; there was a guard at the gates to keep them out. The place where God walked with them, they could not return. And while we aren't to blame for their sin, their penchant for sin passed down to all of us, and we're responsible for our own. Every one of us has sinned, so everyone has been lost.

Everyone has rebelled against God. Now some of you fit that description to a tee at one point in time; you partied, you rebelled, in ways even the world would recognize. Some of us didn't. I became a Christian around age 8, and lots of people thought I was a good kid. But that first turning of my heart over to God didn't stop me from rebelling in subtler ways, in ways that were hidden and personal but no less serious. Former President Jimmy Carter was ridiculed for an interview when he said he had sinned against God when he had "lusted in his heart," but spiritually, he knew what he was talking about. Being good often goes only skin deep because we receive affirmation for it; under the surface is still mutiny.

Even now, amongst those of us who are no longer lost but have been found by Jesus, we know what it is to foster that rebellion in our hearts. We know slander and gossip, unforgiveness and malice, self-righteousness and pride. Even if we have known and followed God our whole lives, we know we often wander – as the hymn says, "Prone to wonder, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love – take my heart, Lord, take and seal it, seal it for Thy court's above." Only God's grace to us is what keeps us from stepping off the path into the darkness again.

In the last year, our denomination commissioned a survey of the local area we are trying to reach for Christ. It found a third of folks have a church home that they attend regularly and participate in frequently. Another third of folks have a loose association with Christianity and may go to church at Christmas or Easter or special occasions, but they do not have a meaningful connection with Christ. The final third have no connection with Christian belief whatsoever. Whenever you are driving in this community, in this portion of Macomb Township, whoever you see on the street or in the market or driving past in the SUV, if our stats are right and we make very generous assumptions, *2 out of 3 people you see are spiritually lost*.

Not only does this form the first part of the story we tell, it convicts us. People are spiritually lost; they don't know God and are far from Him. We may hang around with people we assume attend church, but what do we know? There are people who consider CrossWay their home church just because they come to Meal and a Movie once a month and never even worship with us! If you knew a toddler was lost in Meijer, would you just ignore him? If you weren't sure if he was lost but he was standing alone and no one was nearby, wouldn't you check? Of course you would! Hopefully, we all would! But we don't check on those around us about their spiritual state if we don't have in our minds the possibility that they are lost.

Perhaps the worst thing about being spiritual lost is the second important fact to remember: *the lost are in denial about their lost state, which they cannot reverse on their own and will be permanent without intervention.* I read Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden* in school; it's about his experience living as simply as possible. He died at 44. On his deathbed, his aunt Louisa asked him if he had made his peace with God. Thoreau responded: "I did not know we had ever quarreled." That's the view of most spiritually lost people. They either are completely ignorant or they are in denial.

The same thing comes into play when someone pulls out their GPS when your highway exit is closed. Our first thought is, "I'm not lost!" Maybe you aren't. Maybe you know how to get to where you're going when the path has suddenly changed. And maybe you don't. Our problem is not knowing we're lost; we figure that out pretty quickly. The problem is admitting we are wrong, we remain lost because we can't admit we don't know where we're going; we don't even start looking to go the right way again.

In Romans 1, Paul says that everyone knows God exists from nature alone, but we deny those signs and follow the path to oblivion, becoming more and more deceived and depraved as we go. Our deception is so complete that we genuinely don't know what we don't know. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that "the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

A few decades ago, it wasn't hard to find a genuine Christian in your circle of friends to ask questions if you had a spiritual crisis; they'd probably invite you to church, and you'd go. But now, in many places, people have large circles of friends but don't know a single evangelical Christian. We're not even on their radar when there is a crisis. In the moment where we could provide directions, we are unknown to them. That's a problem we'll address in a minute.

But the central key is this: they aren't going to find God without a guide. Scripture, another Christian, a church, someone to lead the way, they have to have it; they need a path to the Holy Spirit's work Paul mentioned. Otherwise, they will be stuck. And when I say stuck, I don't just mean at an impasse. I mean that unless there is intervention where they come to know the truth, where they believe, where God finds them and they find God, if they are not found by the end of their lives, they will be lost forever. Because of their rebellion against God and their rejection of Him, they will stay outside of His presence through all eternity. That's time beyond any of us can even comprehend. It's a permanent, unalterable state. And it will be totally just on God's part because they will have freely chosen to ignore or reject Him. Jesus describes hell as a place of eternal punishment, and no part of it is as scary as eternity outside the presence of God.

Friends, this is serious business. Our faith can be as solid as a rock – trusting in Jesus for salvation, confident of His grace, acting in love and mercy as He teaches, becoming more and more like Him – but if we falter on this one point, we do so at the peril of souls. Satan's only stronghold in the lives of the otherwise faithful is to convince us that other people are just fine the way they are, that they will find their way to heaven without our assistance. But as we found out in Bible study Tuesday night, we are called to be heralds, messengers of the good news. The stakes are too great for us to ignore our duty.

That leads right into my final thought tonight. *We are the shepherds. We are the woman with the lost coin.* Jesus is the good shepherd, but we are His undershepherds. If God is the one searching for His lost coin, then we are the hands and feet He uses to move the couch and the table and the chest of drawers in the search. God has put an all-points bulletin out to His officers – my children are lost; go patrol the streets and search until you can bring them back to me.

The search is diligent. The woman lights a lamp, sweeps the floor, persistently checks every nook and cranny until the coin is found. The shepherd doesn't stop his search until the lost sheep is found. And then there's a party! Both of them cry out, "Rejoice with me! I've found what was lost!" When somebody steps out of a life of sin and places their trust in Jesus, there's whooping and hollering in heaven, and there should be in the church too! We need that rejoicing!

We need to seek the lost for their sake, for their salvation, and for our sake too. A church that doesn't seek the lost is like a car on a trip from New York to LA on one tank of gas. Pretty soon it's going to stop going if you don't fill up the tank. Not only do new believers gain eternal life, but our lives in Christ are renewed as we rejoice with them, as we celebrate our own salvation as we celebrate theirs. Just as the woman with the lost coin now has it to use, just as the shepherd has the sheep back and can use its wool, as we disciple and train and nurture new believers, we benefit from all they bring to us. Every person's story of being led to Jesus renews and refreshes us; it expands the story of how God is saving His people in all times and all places.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we are called to share news of Him. We are not called to convince people, though our words will do that. We are not called to force, cajole, coax, or sweet-talk people into believing, because the message is too incredible and too impossible to believe unless God is at work in their lives. If we do our job, God will work to get through all the barriers for those who would respond to Him.

Our job is to tell the story of God and our relationship with Him. And the very first part of that story is our lostness. We must begin there because no one can be found, no one can be saved, if they aren't first convinced that they are lost and in need of rescue. The amazing story God is telling through human history is one with a real problem, a real dilemma, and we cannot ignore it. The story doesn't make sense without it. But once we begin the story with the tale of how we became lost and how we've remained lost, God creates a need in our listeners to know how the story continues and how they can get out of the mess we're in.

It's tempting to end tonight with some words of reassurance, of hope. And next week, that's where we will land. But tonight, I want you to go home with a sense of urgency. I don't want us to go home peaceful. I want us to go home on alert. People are lost around us. People around us need hope, need healing, need the gospel, need eternal life. They need to be found before it is too late. This week, I want you to look around and recognize the lost people God has put in your midst, people that God may choose you to reach. This week, start praying, "Lord God, how would you use me as your storyteller?" Start thinking about your own story of being lost and found and how God can use that as you tell His story. Let's go out and begin to see what God would have us do as rescuers of the lost, as shepherds running after God's sheep, bringing them back to their eternal home.