

GOD INVITES LOST PEOPLE**LUKE 15:1-10**

I heard about a homemade sign - a lost dog sign. There was a big cash reward for whoever found the lost dog, and a description of the dog. Here's what the sign said: "He's only got three legs, he's blind in the left eye, he's missing a right ear, his tail has been broken off, he was neutered accidentally by a fence—ouch!—he's almost deaf, and he answers to the name 'Lucky.'" That dog was anything but lucky! He'd been through a whole lot of mess. But he was lucky because he had an owner who loved him and wanted him back. Today, I want to talk to you about being lost and about having an Owner who wants you back.

We're in the midst of a series of messages that tell us something important about God. God is an inviting God. The Bible reminds us that God invites all kinds of people into a relationship with Himself – even people we might write off as being spectacularly unworthy of God's love, grace and mercy. For instance, two weeks ago we saw that God loves dirty people – people who have messed up in life and lived far from God. Last week we saw that God loves empty people – people who have tried everything and everyone but God and have nothing to show for it. Now today, I want you to look with me at two stories Jesus – sometimes called parables – that reveal God's heart for the biggest category of people out there that God invites. That group is lost people. Let's read those stories right now. Both stories underline the same truths. At least four simple facts emerge from these two stories. The first one is that...

EVERY PERSON WITHOUT GOD IS LOST.

Jesus was addressing two very different groups of people. One group made no attempt to please God or live good, moral lives. They're referred to here as tax collectors and sinners. The other group was very religious and morally upright. They're called Pharisees and teachers of the law. The second group had concluded that God had no use for the first group because quite obviously they made no effort to live by God's standards of personal behavior. Their lifestyle choices were clearly displeasing to God. Now, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were offended by Jesus. He went out of his way to socialize with these ungodly people suggesting that God did have an interest in them after all. Ironically, both groups were made up of lost people. Both groups included people far from God. The tax collectors and sinners knew they were lost. It was obvious to them as well as to others that they didn't honor God by how they lived their everyday lives. The Pharisees and teachers of the law, however, had no idea they were lost, too. In fact, they were highly offended by Jesus' not too subtle suggestion that their lives didn't much honor God either.

What does it mean to be "lost"? Some of us here today are lost, but we don't know it. It reminds me of a news story that came out of Iceland not long ago. A woman tourist was reported missing after she supposedly failed to return to the tour bus. The driver waited for an hour and then notified the police. Search and

rescue teams were sent to the area, but the rescue efforts were called off at 3 in the morning. Why? It turns out the missing woman had been on the bus the whole time. She even participated in the search for herself. Apparently, before getting back on the bus she had changed clothes and freshened up so the other passengers didn't recognize her. The local chief of police said that she didn't recognize herself in the description of the missing person. She had no idea that she was lost. You can be lost and not know it. You can be spiritually lost – far from God – and not know it.

When something is lost, it's separated from its ideal environment. The sheep had been separated from the flock – the shepherd and the other sheep. The coin had been separated from its owner. Both were lost. People can be lost, too. The ideal environment for human beings is a close, growing, personal relationship with God Himself. But no one starts out that way. In fact, all of us start out life being lost. All of us start out in life separated from God because of something the Bible calls sin. The Bible even compares us to sheep. It says, "All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own..." (Is. 53:6 NLT) That reminds me of the lost sheep in Jesus' story.

What is "sin" after all? At its deepest level, sin is an inner attitude of hostility—sometimes conscious but often unconscious - towards God. The evidence of that hostility towards God is in actual behaviors and attitudes that underline our distaste for God: hatred of others, lying, self-centeredness, stealing, sexual immorality, greed – just to name a few. As a direct result, we live disoriented lives. The sheep got disoriented (lost) and couldn't find its way back to the flock. Lost people usually sense that their lives are disoriented. There's nothing that integrates their lives; nothing that pulls it all together. The reason for that disorientation is the lack of a relationship with God. He's the One who integrates our lives. God is like the hub of a wheel. A wheel without any hub - any center – just buckles and collapses. People without God eventually buckle and collapse, too. Every person without God is lost. And every person who has lived, is living now and will ever live starts out life being lost.

How many of you ever played Hide N' Seek? It's more fun to be a hider than a seeker. Hiders feel like they're in control of the game. Nobody wanted to be the seeker. Nobody wanted to be It. "You're It! But, I don't want to be It! Well, it's your turn to be It!" There's a kind of spiritual Hide N' Seek going on all the time. Do you know who is It? God is It. God is the One seeking those who are hiding from Him. And some folk hide really well, don't they? We like to think that we seek out and search for God, but the truth is that all of us are hiders. Some are just better hiders than others. Each of us has this natural desire to run away from God and hide. All of us have character flaw and areas of spiritual resistance that makes us uneasy about being in God's presence. Do you remember what Adam and Eve did right after they sinned when God wanted to talk to them? They hid. God will let you hide from Him at least for awhile. But the longer you hide from God, the longer you stay lost.

Some of us here today are lost and we need to get found. Could the coin find itself? No. Could the sheep have made it back to the flock on its own? I've had very little contact with sheep, but from what I've read about them, they're not the smartest animals out there. They have a tendency to wander off, get lost and not know how to get back. If the shepherd in Jesus' story didn't find this lost sheep, it was going to die. Jesus says this is the condition of every human being. Left to yourself, you will die. Every person without God is lost. Here's a second fact from Jesus' two stories:

EVERY LOST PERSON HAS GREAT VALUE TO GOD.

That was a new idea for most of the people in Jesus' day and time. No one thought God searched for and sought out lost people. Religious people never said, "... 'there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents.'" (Luke 15:10 NLT) No, the attitude was more like, "There will be joy in Heaven when God obliterates every last sinful person." Both of Jesus' stories make the same point. Something of great value had come up missing – a sheep and a coin. Both were precious and important – the coin to the woman who owned it and the sheep to the shepherd. Jesus is saying that God is like the woman and like the shepherd. Lost people are precious and valuable to God.

Notice something else in both stories. Despite being lost, both the coin and the sheep remain valuable. The shepherd doesn't say, "It's just one lousy sheep. I've still got 99 others. That's just a 1% loss. You've got to expect some loss in any business." Nor does the woman say, "It's just one coin. I've still got the other nine. Is it really worth my time and effort to try and find it?" What's the implication? Every lost person has great value to God regardless of how profoundly far from God he or she may be at any given moment. You never lose your value to God even when you're lost.

Lost people are hiding from God. Their lifestyles displease God. They're rejecting His love and showing no gratitude for all that He's done for them. Nevertheless, they're still of infinite value to God. You don't suddenly become valuable to God when you become a follower of Jesus. No, it's precisely because you always had value to God that you became a follower of Jesus! When you become a follower of Jesus, you can look back and see how much God had been inviting you long before you ever knew Him. He brought a key friend into your life at just the right moment. God might have used a pastor's message, a youth leader's challenge, or a friend's encouragement at just the right time to help you trust in Jesus. The end result was that you got found.

Perhaps that's where you are today. You're being lovingly searched out and sought after by a seeking, inviting God. Yes, you can resist Him and hide. You can stay lost if that's what you want. But,, why? Get found! We give up on most people pretty easily. God doesn't. Aren't you glad that God didn't give up on

you? God loves the people who are still lost out there just as much as the ones who have been found. And when one of those lost ones gets found, all of Heaven rejoices with God. There's joy in Heaven beyond description and explanation. Now, here's a third fact from Jesus' two stories:

EVERY LOST PERSON IS COSTLY TO BE FOUND.

This one lost sheep and this one lost coin warranted an all out search. The shepherd put his own life at risk to go out in the dark looking for that dumb, lost sheep. He could have been attacked by a wild animal and been killed. He could have gotten injured tracking that sheep over the rugged countryside. There was personal cost involved in finding that sheep. The woman who lost her coin had to do more than flick on a light switch. Homes in Jesus' day neither had electricity or that much natural light. Many homes had just one door; a few others might have had just one window. They were dark places all the time. The floors of the homes of common people were just so much packed down earth covered with straw to ward off the cold and dampness of the bare ground. This woman would have had to rake up all the stray, sift through it carefully and sweep the floor. Looking for this lost coin would demand considerable time, energy and aggravation on her part. But its value justified it.

It cost God a great deal to find lost people. That's the central story of the Bible. Jesus, the Son of God, gave up Heaven and whatever it means to operate as God in that dimension and took upon Himself humanity with all of its limitations. But more than that, He freely chose humiliation and rejection by other human beings. But more than that, He allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross and killed because it was the only way that lost people could have their sins forgiven. It's at the cross that God claims lost people for Himself. It's at and through the cross, that God – the Heavenly Shepherd, claims all those lost sheep who have wandered away – and all those lost coins hiding in some dark corner – and who need so desperately to be found. If you're a lost person today – and right now I believe the Holy Spirit will tell you if you are – I want you to take another look at the cross. Imagine Jesus nailed there naked, bleeding, tortured, dying. That's the cost God paid to find you. Please stop hiding from Him. Please get found.

Back in August 1957 four climbers—two Italians and two Germans—were climbing the 6,000 foot near-vertical North Face in the Swiss Alps. The two German climbers disappeared and were never heard from again. The two Italian climbers, exhausted and dying, were stuck on two narrow ledges a thousand feet below the summit. The Swiss Alpine Club forbade rescue attempts in this area (it was just too dangerous), but a small group of Swiss climbers decided to launch a private rescue effort to save the Italians. They climbed up the other side of the mountain and then carefully lowered a climber named Alfred Hellepart down the 6,000 foot North Face. They suspended Hellepart on a cable an inch thick as they lowered him into the abyss.

Here's how Alfred Hellepart described the rescue in his own words: "As I was lowered down the summit ... my comrades on top grew further and further distant, until they disappeared from sight. At this moment I felt an indescribable aloneness. Then for the first time I peered down the abyss of the North Face of the Eiger. The terror of the sight robbed me of breath. ...The brooding blackness of the Face, falling away in almost endless expanse beneath me, made me look with awful longing to the thin cable disappearing about me in the mist. I was a tiny human being dangling in space between heaven and hell. The sole relief from terror was ...my mission to save the climber below."

That's the central story of the Bible. We were trapped, but in the person of Jesus, God lowered himself into the abyss of our sin and suffering. In Jesus, God became "a tiny human being dangling between heaven and hell." He did it to save the people trapped below—you and me. The Christian faith is far more radical than just another religion telling you how to be good in your own power. It tells us the story of God's risky, costly, sacrificial rescue effort on our behalf.

Now if it costs God that much to find lost people, it will cost the followers of Jesus something, too. What will it cost you and me to help God find lost people? It will cost you time and energy. You'll need to start praying for lost people in your circle of relationships, look for ways to build relationships and then point people to Jesus in ways they can understand. It might cost you some rejection or misunderstanding. Let's face it, some lost people are content to remain lost and don't want to be found! It will cost our church something to help God find lost people. What are we willing to do, as a church, to reach lost people more effectively? What are we willing to give up or to change if necessary? Are we willing, for example, to change our worship service? How about some of our programs or ministries? The questions this or any church should always be asking are these: "Are we helping God find lost people? If not, why not? If we are, can we do it better?" Wouldn't it be wonderful to fill up every seat in here today and every Sunday with lost people open to being found, hoping to be found, wanting to be found by our inviting God? A fourth and final fact:

EVERY LOST PERSON FOUND IS CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION.

I invite you to use your imagination. Can you see that shepherd striding back into his village triumphantly with a great smile lighting up his face? Across his shoulders is that lost sheep. The entire village erupts with joy and there's a time of celebration. Or, can you see that little woman her fingers shaking with joy and relief as she reaches down and picks up that lost coin in some dark, dusty corner of her home? Her heart races and she runs out of the house shouting the good news to the entire neighborhood. An instant celebration breaks out there and then. That's how God feels when just one sinner is found. Jesus points that out twice in these verses. "In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God.... In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents." (Lk 15:7, 10 NLT)

That's what happened in Heaven when you trusted in Jesus as your Savior and made the decision to follow Him as your Lord. Every time a lost person is found God invites all the inhabitants of Heaven to join Him in a great cosmic, universal celebration that on this Earth we can't begin to imagine. Write it down. The greatest joy in the Universe isn't when a baby is born or when a couple deeply in love gets married – as wonderful as those events may be. No, it's when lost people – people once far from God – are found, who surrender to God's love and grace, who become children of God, who start to follow Jesus and in whom the Holy Spirit now dwells.

Do you remember back in 2010 how billions of people around the globe were captivated by the story of those Chilean miners trapped underground? I recall Cheryl and I being mesmerized by that story. Thirty-three desperate men trapped beneath two thousand feet of solid rock. The collapse of a main tunnel had sealed their exit and thrust them into survival mode. They ate two spoonfuls of tuna, a sip of milk, and a morsel of peaches—every other day. For two months they prayed for someone to save them. On the surface above, the Chilean rescue team worked around the clock, consulting NASA, meeting with experts. They designed a thirteen-foot-tall capsule and drilled, first a communication hole, then an excavation tunnel. There was no guarantee of success. No one had ever been trapped underground this long and lived to tell about it.

Then on October 13, 2010, the men began to emerge, slapping high fives and leading victory chants. A great-grandfather. A forty-four-year-old who was planning a wedding. Then a nineteen-year-old. All had different stories, but all had made the same decision. They trusted someone else to save them. No one returned the rescue offer with a declaration of independence: "I can get out of here on my own. Just give me a new drill." They had stared at the stone tomb long enough to reach the unanimous opinion: "We need help. We need someone to penetrate this world and pull us out." And when the rescue capsule came, they climbed in. Those who needed rescuing got rescued. The lost were found.

Is it really so hard for you to do the same? No one but God can rescue you and me. He provided the way out of our lostness through His Son, Jesus. I invite you to accept God's gracious invitation today so that we can celebrate with you for all eternity.

GOD INVITES LOST PEOPLE**LUKE 15:1-10**

I heard about a homemade sign - a lost dog sign. There was a big cash reward for whoever found the lost dog, and a description of the dog. Here's what the sign said: "He's only got three legs, he's blind in the left eye, he's missing a right ear, his tail has been broken off, he was neutered accidentally by a fence—ouch!—he's almost deaf, and he answers to the name 'Lucky.'" That dog was anything but lucky! He'd been through a whole lot of mess. But he was lucky because he had an owner who loved him and wanted him back. Today, I want to talk to you about being lost and about having an Owner who wants you back.

We're in the midst of a series of messages that tell us something important about God. God is an inviting God. The Bible reminds us that God invites all kinds of people into a relationship with Himself – even people we might write off as being spectacularly unworthy of God's love, grace and mercy. For instance, two weeks ago we saw that God loves dirty people – people who have messed up in life and lived far from God. Last week we saw that God loves empty people – people who have tried everything and everyone but God and have nothing to show for it. Now today, I want you to look with me at two stories Jesus – sometimes called parables – that reveal God's heart for the biggest category of people out there that God invites. That group is lost people. Let's read those stories right now. Both stories underline the same truths. At least four simple facts emerge from these two stories. The first one is that...

EVERY PERSON WITHOUT GOD IS LOST.

Jesus was addressing two very different groups of people. One group made no attempt to please God or live good, moral lives. They're referred to here as tax collectors and sinners. The other group was very religious and morally upright. They're called Pharisees and teachers of the law. The second group had concluded that God had no use for the first group because quite obviously they made no effort to live by God's standards of personal behavior. Their lifestyle choices were clearly displeasing to God. Now, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were offended by Jesus. He went out of his way to socialize with these ungodly people suggesting that God did have an interest in them after all. Ironically, both groups were made up of lost people. Both groups included people far from God. The tax collectors and sinners knew they were lost. It was obvious to them as well as to others that they didn't honor God by how they lived their everyday lives. The Pharisees and teachers of the law, however, had no idea they were lost, too. In fact, they were highly offended by Jesus' not too subtle suggestion that their lives didn't much honor God either.

What does it mean to be "lost"? Some of us here today are lost, but we don't know it. It reminds me of a news story that came out of Iceland not long ago. A woman tourist was reported missing after she supposedly failed to return to the tour bus. The driver waited for an hour and then notified the police. Search and

rescue teams were sent to the area, but the rescue efforts were called off at 3 in the morning. Why? It turns out the missing woman had been on the bus the whole time. She even participated in the search for herself. Apparently, before getting back on the bus she had changed clothes and freshened up so the other passengers didn't recognize her. The local chief of police said that she didn't recognize herself in the description of the missing person. She had no idea that she was lost. You can be lost and not know it. You can be spiritually lost – far from God – and not know it.

When something is lost, it's separated from its ideal environment. The sheep had been separated from the flock – the shepherd and the other sheep. The coin had been separated from its owner. Both were lost. People can be lost, too. The ideal environment for human beings is a close, growing, personal relationship with God Himself. But no one starts out that way. In fact, all of us start out life being lost. All of us start out in life separated from God because of something the Bible calls sin. The Bible even compares us to sheep. It says, "All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own..." (Is. 53:6 NLT) That reminds me of the lost sheep in Jesus' story.

What is "sin" after all? At its deepest level, sin is an inner attitude of hostility—sometimes conscious but often unconscious - towards God. The evidence of that hostility towards God is in actual behaviors and attitudes that underline our distaste for God: hatred of others, lying, self-centeredness, stealing, sexual immorality, greed – just to name a few. As a direct result, we live disoriented lives. The sheep got disoriented (lost) and couldn't find its way back to the flock. Lost people usually sense that their lives are disoriented. There's nothing that integrates their lives; nothing that pulls it all together. The reason for that disorientation is the lack of a relationship with God. He's the One who integrates our lives. God is like the hub of a wheel. A wheel without any hub - any center – just buckles and collapses. People without God eventually buckle and collapse, too. Every person without God is lost. And every person who has lived, is living now and will ever live starts out life being lost.

How many of you ever played Hide N' Seek? It's more fun to be a hider than a seeker. Hiders feel like they're in control of the game. Nobody wanted to be the seeker. Nobody wanted to be It. "You're It! But, I don't want to be It! Well, it's your turn to be It!" There's a kind of spiritual Hide N' Seek going on all the time. Do you know who is It? God is It. God is the One seeking those who are hiding from Him. And some folk hide really well, don't they? We like to think that we seek out and search for God, but the truth is that all of us are hiders. Some are just better hiders than others. Each of us has this natural desire to run away from God and hide. All of us have character flaw and areas of spiritual resistance that makes us uneasy about being in God's presence. Do you remember what Adam and Eve did right after they sinned when God wanted to talk to them? They hid. God will let you hide from Him at least for awhile. But the longer you hide from God, the longer you stay lost.

Some of us here today are lost and we need to get found. Could the coin find itself? No. Could the sheep have made it back to the flock on its own? I've had very little contact with sheep, but from what I've read about them, they're not the smartest animals out there. They have a tendency to wander off, get lost and not know how to get back. If the shepherd in Jesus' story didn't find this lost sheep, it was going to die. Jesus says this is the condition of every human being. Left to yourself, you will die. Every person without God is lost. Here's a second fact from Jesus' two stories:

EVERY LOST PERSON HAS GREAT VALUE TO GOD.

That was a new idea for most of the people in Jesus' day and time. No one thought God searched for and sought out lost people. Religious people never said, "... 'there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents.'" (Luke 15:10 NLT) No, the attitude was more like, "There will be joy in Heaven when God obliterates every last sinful person." Both of Jesus' stories make the same point. Something of great value had come up missing – a sheep and a coin. Both were precious and important – the coin to the woman who owned it and the sheep to the shepherd. Jesus is saying that God is like the woman and like the shepherd. Lost people are precious and valuable to God.

Notice something else in both stories. Despite being lost, both the coin and the sheep remain valuable. The shepherd doesn't say, "It's just one lousy sheep. I've still got 99 others. That's just a 1% loss. You've got to expect some loss in any business." Nor does the woman say, "It's just one coin. I've still got the other nine. Is it really worth my time and effort to try and find it?" What's the implication? Every lost person has great value to God regardless of how profoundly far from God he or she may be at any given moment. You never lose your value to God even when you're lost.

Lost people are hiding from God. Their lifestyles displease God. They're rejecting His love and showing no gratitude for all that He's done for them. Nevertheless, they're still of infinite value to God. You don't suddenly become valuable to God when you become a follower of Jesus. No, it's precisely because you always had value to God that you became a follower of Jesus! When you become a follower of Jesus, you can look back and see how much God had been inviting you long before you ever knew Him. He brought a key friend into your life at just the right moment. God might have used a pastor's message, a youth leader's challenge, or a friend's encouragement at just the right time to help you trust in Jesus. The end result was that you got found.

Perhaps that's where you are today. You're being lovingly searched out and sought after by a seeking, inviting God. Yes, you can resist Him and hide. You can stay lost if that's what you want. But,, why? Get found! We give up on most people pretty easily. God doesn't. Aren't you glad that God didn't give up on

you? God loves the people who are still lost out there just as much as the ones who have been found. And when one of those lost ones gets found, all of Heaven rejoices with God. There's joy in Heaven beyond description and explanation. Now, here's a third fact from Jesus' two stories:

EVERY LOST PERSON IS COSTLY TO BE FOUND.

This one lost sheep and this one lost coin warranted an all out search. The shepherd put his own life at risk to go out in the dark looking for that dumb, lost sheep. He could have been attacked by a wild animal and been killed. He could have gotten injured tracking that sheep over the rugged countryside. There was personal cost involved in finding that sheep. The woman who lost her coin had to do more than flick on a light switch. Homes in Jesus' day neither had electricity or that much natural light. Many homes had just one door; a few others might have had just one window. They were dark places all the time. The floors of the homes of common people were just so much packed down earth covered with straw to ward off the cold and dampness of the bare ground. This woman would have had to rake up all the stray, sift through it carefully and sweep the floor. Looking for this lost coin would demand considerable time, energy and aggravation on her part. But its value justified it.

It cost God a great deal to find lost people. That's the central story of the Bible. Jesus, the Son of God, gave up Heaven and whatever it means to operate as God in that dimension and took upon Himself humanity with all of its limitations. But more than that, He freely chose humiliation and rejection by other human beings. But more than that, He allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross and killed because it was the only way that lost people could have their sins forgiven. It's at the cross that God claims lost people for Himself. It's at and through the cross, that God – the Heavenly Shepherd, claims all those lost sheep who have wandered away – and all those lost coins hiding in some dark corner – and who need so desperately to be found. If you're a lost person today – and right now I believe the Holy Spirit will tell you if you are – I want you to take another look at the cross. Imagine Jesus nailed there naked, bleeding, tortured, dying. That's the cost God paid to find you. Please stop hiding from Him. Please get found.

Back in August 1957 four climbers—two Italians and two Germans—were climbing the 6,000 foot near-vertical North Face in the Swiss Alps. The two German climbers disappeared and were never heard from again. The two Italian climbers, exhausted and dying, were stuck on two narrow ledges a thousand feet below the summit. The Swiss Alpine Club forbade rescue attempts in this area (it was just too dangerous), but a small group of Swiss climbers decided to launch a private rescue effort to save the Italians. They climbed up the other side of the mountain and then carefully lowered a climber named Alfred Hellepart down the 6,000 foot North Face. They suspended Hellepart on a cable an inch thick as they lowered him into the abyss.

Here's how Alfred Hellepart described the rescue in his own words: "As I was lowered down the summit ... my comrades on top grew further and further distant, until they disappeared from sight. At this moment I felt an indescribable aloneness. Then for the first time I peered down the abyss of the North Face of the Eiger. The terror of the sight robbed me of breath. ...The brooding blackness of the Face, falling away in almost endless expanse beneath me, made me look with awful longing to the thin cable disappearing about me in the mist. I was a tiny human being dangling in space between heaven and hell. The sole relief from terror was ...my mission to save the climber below."

That's the central story of the Bible. We were trapped, but in the person of Jesus, God lowered himself into the abyss of our sin and suffering. In Jesus, God became "a tiny human being dangling between heaven and hell." He did it to save the people trapped below—you and me. The Christian faith is far more radical than just another religion telling you how to be good in your own power. It tells us the story of God's risky, costly, sacrificial rescue effort on our behalf.

Now if it costs God that much to find lost people, it will cost the followers of Jesus something, too. What will it cost you and me to help God find lost people? It will cost you time and energy. You'll need to start praying for lost people in your circle of relationships, look for ways to build relationships and then point people to Jesus in ways they can understand. It might cost you some rejection or misunderstanding. Let's face it, some lost people are content to remain lost and don't want to be found! It will cost our church something to help God find lost people. What are we willing to do, as a church, to reach lost people more effectively? What are we willing to give up or to change if necessary? Are we willing, for example, to change our worship service? How about some of our programs or ministries? The questions this or any church should always be asking are these: "Are we helping God find lost people? If not, why not? If we are, can we do it better?" Wouldn't it be wonderful to fill up every seat in here today and every Sunday with lost people open to being found, hoping to be found, wanting to be found by our inviting God? A fourth and final fact:

EVERY LOST PERSON FOUND IS CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION.

I invite you to use your imagination. Can you see that shepherd striding back into his village triumphantly with a great smile lighting up his face? Across his shoulders is that lost sheep. The entire village erupts with joy and there's a time of celebration. Or, can you see that little woman her fingers shaking with joy and relief as she reaches down and picks up that lost coin in some dark, dusty corner of her home? Her heart races and she runs out of the house shouting the good news to the entire neighborhood. An instant celebration breaks out there and then. That's how God feels when just one sinner is found. Jesus points that out twice in these verses. "In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God.... In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents." (Lk 15:7, 10 NLT)

That's what happened in Heaven when you trusted in Jesus as your Savior and made the decision to follow Him as your Lord. Every time a lost person is found God invites all the inhabitants of Heaven to join Him in a great cosmic, universal celebration that on this Earth we can't begin to imagine. Write it down. The greatest joy in the Universe isn't when a baby is born or when a couple deeply in love gets married – as wonderful as those events may be. No, it's when lost people – people once far from God – are found, who surrender to God's love and grace, who become children of God, who start to follow Jesus and in whom the Holy Spirit now dwells.

Do you remember back in 2010 how billions of people around the globe were captivated by the story of those Chilean miners trapped underground? I recall Cheryl and I being mesmerized by that story. Thirty-three desperate men trapped beneath two thousand feet of solid rock. The collapse of a main tunnel had sealed their exit and thrust them into survival mode. They ate two spoonfuls of tuna, a sip of milk, and a morsel of peaches—every other day. For two months they prayed for someone to save them. On the surface above, the Chilean rescue team worked around the clock, consulting NASA, meeting with experts. They designed a thirteen-foot-tall capsule and drilled, first a communication hole, then an excavation tunnel. There was no guarantee of success. No one had ever been trapped underground this long and lived to tell about it.

Then on October 13, 2010, the men began to emerge, slapping high fives and leading victory chants. A great-grandfather. A forty-four-year-old who was planning a wedding. Then a nineteen-year-old. All had different stories, but all had made the same decision. They trusted someone else to save them. No one returned the rescue offer with a declaration of independence: "I can get out of here on my own. Just give me a new drill." They had stared at the stone tomb long enough to reach the unanimous opinion: "We need help. We need someone to penetrate this world and pull us out." And when the rescue capsule came, they climbed in. Those who needed rescuing got rescued. The lost were found.

Is it really so hard for you to do the same? No one but God can rescue you and me. He provided the way out of our lostness through His Son, Jesus. I invite you to accept God's gracious invitation today so that we can celebrate with you for all eternity.

GOD INVITES LOST PEOPLE**LUKE 15:1-10**

I heard about a homemade sign - a lost dog sign. There was a big cash reward for whoever found the lost dog, and a description of the dog. Here's what the sign said: "He's only got three legs, he's blind in the left eye, he's missing a right ear, his tail has been broken off, he was neutered accidentally by a fence—ouch!—he's almost deaf, and he answers to the name 'Lucky.'" That dog was anything but lucky! He'd been through a whole lot of mess. But he was lucky because he had an owner who loved him and wanted him back. Today, I want to talk to you about being lost and about having an Owner who wants you back.

We're in the midst of a series of messages that tell us something important about God. God is an inviting God. The Bible reminds us that God invites all kinds of people into a relationship with Himself – even people we might write off as being spectacularly unworthy of God's love, grace and mercy. For instance, two weeks ago we saw that God loves dirty people – people who have messed up in life and lived far from God. Last week we saw that God loves empty people – people who have tried everything and everyone but God and have nothing to show for it. Now today, I want you to look with me at two stories Jesus – sometimes called parables – that reveal God's heart for the biggest category of people out there that God invites. That group is lost people. Let's read those stories right now. Both stories underline the same truths. At least four simple facts emerge from these two stories. The first one is that...

EVERY PERSON WITHOUT GOD IS LOST.

Jesus was addressing two very different groups of people. One group made no attempt to please God or live good, moral lives. They're referred to here as tax collectors and sinners. The other group was very religious and morally upright. They're called Pharisees and teachers of the law. The second group had concluded that God had no use for the first group because quite obviously they made no effort to live by God's standards of personal behavior. Their lifestyle choices were clearly displeasing to God. Now, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were offended by Jesus. He went out of his way to socialize with these ungodly people suggesting that God did have an interest in them after all. Ironically, both groups were made up of lost people. Both groups included people far from God. The tax collectors and sinners knew they were lost. It was obvious to them as well as to others that they didn't honor God by how they lived their everyday lives. The Pharisees and teachers of the law, however, had no idea they were lost, too. In fact, they were highly offended by Jesus' not too subtle suggestion that their lives didn't much honor God either.

What does it mean to be "lost"? Some of us here today are lost, but we don't know it. It reminds me of a news story that came out of Iceland not long ago. A woman tourist was reported missing after she supposedly failed to return to the tour bus. The driver waited for an hour and then notified the police. Search and

rescue teams were sent to the area, but the rescue efforts were called off at 3 in the morning. Why? It turns out the missing woman had been on the bus the whole time. She even participated in the search for herself. Apparently, before getting back on the bus she had changed clothes and freshened up so the other passengers didn't recognize her. The local chief of police said that she didn't recognize herself in the description of the missing person. She had no idea that she was lost. You can be lost and not know it. You can be spiritually lost – far from God – and not know it.

When something is lost, it's separated from its ideal environment. The sheep had been separated from the flock – the shepherd and the other sheep. The coin had been separated from its owner. Both were lost. People can be lost, too. The ideal environment for human beings is a close, growing, personal relationship with God Himself. But no one starts out that way. In fact, all of us start out life being lost. All of us start out in life separated from God because of something the Bible calls sin. The Bible even compares us to sheep. It says, "All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own..." (Is. 53:6 NLT) That reminds me of the lost sheep in Jesus' story.

What is "sin" after all? At its deepest level, sin is an inner attitude of hostility—sometimes conscious but often unconscious - towards God. The evidence of that hostility towards God is in actual behaviors and attitudes that underline our distaste for God: hatred of others, lying, self-centeredness, stealing, sexual immorality, greed – just to name a few. As a direct result, we live disoriented lives. The sheep got disoriented (lost) and couldn't find its way back to the flock. Lost people usually sense that their lives are disoriented. There's nothing that integrates their lives; nothing that pulls it all together. The reason for that disorientation is the lack of a relationship with God. He's the One who integrates our lives. God is like the hub of a wheel. A wheel without any hub - any center – just buckles and collapses. People without God eventually buckle and collapse, too. Every person without God is lost. And every person who has lived, is living now and will ever live starts out life being lost.

How many of you ever played Hide N' Seek? It's more fun to be a hider than a seeker. Hiders feel like they're in control of the game. Nobody wanted to be the seeker. Nobody wanted to be It. "You're It! But, I don't want to be It! Well, it's your turn to be It!" There's a kind of spiritual Hide N' Seek going on all the time. Do you know who is It? God is It. God is the One seeking those who are hiding from Him. And some folk hide really well, don't they? We like to think that we seek out and search for God, but the truth is that all of us are hiders. Some are just better hiders than others. Each of us has this natural desire to run away from God and hide. All of us have character flaw and areas of spiritual resistance that makes us uneasy about being in God's presence. Do you remember what Adam and Eve did right after they sinned when God wanted to talk to them? They hid. God will let you hide from Him at least for awhile. But the longer you hide from God, the longer you stay lost.

Some of us here today are lost and we need to get found. Could the coin find itself? No. Could the sheep have made it back to the flock on its own? I've had very little contact with sheep, but from what I've read about them, they're not the smartest animals out there. They have a tendency to wander off, get lost and not know how to get back. If the shepherd in Jesus' story didn't find this lost sheep, it was going to die. Jesus says this is the condition of every human being. Left to yourself, you will die. Every person without God is lost. Here's a second fact from Jesus' two stories:

EVERY LOST PERSON HAS GREAT VALUE TO GOD.

That was a new idea for most of the people in Jesus' day and time. No one thought God searched for and sought out lost people. Religious people never said, "... 'there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents.'" (Luke 15:10 NLT) No, the attitude was more like, "There will be joy in Heaven when God obliterates every last sinful person." Both of Jesus' stories make the same point. Something of great value had come up missing – a sheep and a coin. Both were precious and important – the coin to the woman who owned it and the sheep to the shepherd. Jesus is saying that God is like the woman and like the shepherd. Lost people are precious and valuable to God.

Notice something else in both stories. Despite being lost, both the coin and the sheep remain valuable. The shepherd doesn't say, "It's just one lousy sheep. I've still got 99 others. That's just a 1% loss. You've got to expect some loss in any business." Nor does the woman say, "It's just one coin. I've still got the other nine. Is it really worth my time and effort to try and find it?" What's the implication? Every lost person has great value to God regardless of how profoundly far from God he or she may be at any given moment. You never lose your value to God even when you're lost.

Lost people are hiding from God. Their lifestyles displease God. They're rejecting His love and showing no gratitude for all that He's done for them. Nevertheless, they're still of infinite value to God. You don't suddenly become valuable to God when you become a follower of Jesus. No, it's precisely because you always had value to God that you became a follower of Jesus! When you become a follower of Jesus, you can look back and see how much God had been inviting you long before you ever knew Him. He brought a key friend into your life at just the right moment. God might have used a pastor's message, a youth leader's challenge, or a friend's encouragement at just the right time to help you trust in Jesus. The end result was that you got found.

Perhaps that's where you are today. You're being lovingly searched out and sought after by a seeking, inviting God. Yes, you can resist Him and hide. You can stay lost if that's what you want. But,, why? Get found! We give up on most people pretty easily. God doesn't. Aren't you glad that God didn't give up on

you? God loves the people who are still lost out there just as much as the ones who have been found. And when one of those lost ones gets found, all of Heaven rejoices with God. There's joy in Heaven beyond description and explanation. Now, here's a third fact from Jesus' two stories:

EVERY LOST PERSON IS COSTLY TO BE FOUND.

This one lost sheep and this one lost coin warranted an all out search. The shepherd put his own life at risk to go out in the dark looking for that dumb, lost sheep. He could have been attacked by a wild animal and been killed. He could have gotten injured tracking that sheep over the rugged countryside. There was personal cost involved in finding that sheep. The woman who lost her coin had to do more than flick on a light switch. Homes in Jesus' day neither had electricity or that much natural light. Many homes had just one door; a few others might have had just one window. They were dark places all the time. The floors of the homes of common people were just so much packed down earth covered with straw to ward off the cold and dampness of the bare ground. This woman would have had to rake up all the stray, sift through it carefully and sweep the floor. Looking for this lost coin would demand considerable time, energy and aggravation on her part. But its value justified it.

It cost God a great deal to find lost people. That's the central story of the Bible. Jesus, the Son of God, gave up Heaven and whatever it means to operate as God in that dimension and took upon Himself humanity with all of its limitations. But more than that, He freely chose humiliation and rejection by other human beings. But more than that, He allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross and killed because it was the only way that lost people could have their sins forgiven. It's at the cross that God claims lost people for Himself. It's at and through the cross, that God – the Heavenly Shepherd, claims all those lost sheep who have wandered away – and all those lost coins hiding in some dark corner – and who need so desperately to be found. If you're a lost person today – and right now I believe the Holy Spirit will tell you if you are – I want you to take another look at the cross. Imagine Jesus nailed there naked, bleeding, tortured, dying. That's the cost God paid to find you. Please stop hiding from Him. Please get found.

Back in August 1957 four climbers—two Italians and two Germans—were climbing the 6,000 foot near-vertical North Face in the Swiss Alps. The two German climbers disappeared and were never heard from again. The two Italian climbers, exhausted and dying, were stuck on two narrow ledges a thousand feet below the summit. The Swiss Alpine Club forbade rescue attempts in this area (it was just too dangerous), but a small group of Swiss climbers decided to launch a private rescue effort to save the Italians. They climbed up the other side of the mountain and then carefully lowered a climber named Alfred Hellepart down the 6,000 foot North Face. They suspended Hellepart on a cable an inch thick as they lowered him into the abyss.

Here's how Alfred Hellepart described the rescue in his own words: "As I was lowered down the summit ... my comrades on top grew further and further distant, until they disappeared from sight. At this moment I felt an indescribable aloneness. Then for the first time I peered down the abyss of the North Face of the Eiger. The terror of the sight robbed me of breath. ...The brooding blackness of the Face, falling away in almost endless expanse beneath me, made me look with awful longing to the thin cable disappearing about me in the mist. I was a tiny human being dangling in space between heaven and hell. The sole relief from terror was ...my mission to save the climber below."

That's the central story of the Bible. We were trapped, but in the person of Jesus, God lowered himself into the abyss of our sin and suffering. In Jesus, God became "a tiny human being dangling between heaven and hell." He did it to save the people trapped below—you and me. The Christian faith is far more radical than just another religion telling you how to be good in your own power. It tells us the story of God's risky, costly, sacrificial rescue effort on our behalf.

Now if it costs God that much to find lost people, it will cost the followers of Jesus something, too. What will it cost you and me to help God find lost people? It will cost you time and energy. You'll need to start praying for lost people in your circle of relationships, look for ways to build relationships and then point people to Jesus in ways they can understand. It might cost you some rejection or misunderstanding. Let's face it, some lost people are content to remain lost and don't want to be found! It will cost our church something to help God find lost people. What are we willing to do, as a church, to reach lost people more effectively? What are we willing to give up or to change if necessary? Are we willing, for example, to change our worship service? How about some of our programs or ministries? The questions this or any church should always be asking are these: "Are we helping God find lost people? If not, why not? If we are, can we do it better?" Wouldn't it be wonderful to fill up every seat in here today and every Sunday with lost people open to being found, hoping to be found, wanting to be found by our inviting God? A fourth and final fact:

EVERY LOST PERSON FOUND IS CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION.

I invite you to use your imagination. Can you see that shepherd striding back into his village triumphantly with a great smile lighting up his face? Across his shoulders is that lost sheep. The entire village erupts with joy and there's a time of celebration. Or, can you see that little woman her fingers shaking with joy and relief as she reaches down and picks up that lost coin in some dark, dusty corner of her home? Her heart races and she runs out of the house shouting the good news to the entire neighborhood. An instant celebration breaks out there and then. That's how God feels when just one sinner is found. Jesus points that out twice in these verses. "In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God.... In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents." (Lk 15:7, 10 NLT)

That's what happened in Heaven when you trusted in Jesus as your Savior and made the decision to follow Him as your Lord. Every time a lost person is found God invites all the inhabitants of Heaven to join Him in a great cosmic, universal celebration that on this Earth we can't begin to imagine. Write it down. The greatest joy in the Universe isn't when a baby is born or when a couple deeply in love gets married – as wonderful as those events may be. No, it's when lost people – people once far from God – are found, who surrender to God's love and grace, who become children of God, who start to follow Jesus and in whom the Holy Spirit now dwells.

Do you remember back in 2010 how billions of people around the globe were captivated by the story of those Chilean miners trapped underground? I recall Cheryl and I being mesmerized by that story. Thirty-three desperate men trapped beneath two thousand feet of solid rock. The collapse of a main tunnel had sealed their exit and thrust them into survival mode. They ate two spoonfuls of tuna, a sip of milk, and a morsel of peaches—every other day. For two months they prayed for someone to save them. On the surface above, the Chilean rescue team worked around the clock, consulting NASA, meeting with experts. They designed a thirteen-foot-tall capsule and drilled, first a communication hole, then an excavation tunnel. There was no guarantee of success. No one had ever been trapped underground this long and lived to tell about it.

Then on October 13, 2010, the men began to emerge, slapping high fives and leading victory chants. A great-grandfather. A forty-four-year-old who was planning a wedding. Then a nineteen-year-old. All had different stories, but all had made the same decision. They trusted someone else to save them. No one returned the rescue offer with a declaration of independence: "I can get out of here on my own. Just give me a new drill." They had stared at the stone tomb long enough to reach the unanimous opinion: "We need help. We need someone to penetrate this world and pull us out." And when the rescue capsule came, they climbed in. Those who needed rescuing got rescued. The lost were found.

Is it really so hard for you to do the same? No one but God can rescue you and me. He provided the way out of our lostness through His Son, Jesus. I invite you to accept God's gracious invitation today so that we can celebrate with you for all eternity.

GOD INVITES LOST PEOPLE**LUKE 15:1-10**

I heard about a homemade sign - a lost dog sign. There was a big cash reward for whoever found the lost dog, and a description of the dog. Here's what the sign said: "He's only got three legs, he's blind in the left eye, he's missing a right ear, his tail has been broken off, he was neutered accidentally by a fence—ouch!—he's almost deaf, and he answers to the name 'Lucky.'" That dog was anything but lucky! He'd been through a whole lot of mess. But he was lucky because he had an owner who loved him and wanted him back. Today, I want to talk to you about being lost and about having an Owner who wants you back.

We're in the midst of a series of messages that tell us something important about God. God is an inviting God. The Bible reminds us that God invites all kinds of people into a relationship with Himself – even people we might write off as being spectacularly unworthy of God's love, grace and mercy. For instance, two weeks ago we saw that God loves dirty people – people who have messed up in life and lived far from God. Last week we saw that God loves empty people – people who have tried everything and everyone but God and have nothing to show for it. Now today, I want you to look with me at two stories Jesus – sometimes called parables – that reveal God's heart for the biggest category of people out there that God invites. That group is lost people. Let's read those stories right now. Both stories underline the same truths. At least four simple facts emerge from these two stories. The first one is that...

EVERY PERSON WITHOUT GOD IS LOST.

Jesus was addressing two very different groups of people. One group made no attempt to please God or live good, moral lives. They're referred to here as tax collectors and sinners. The other group was very religious and morally upright. They're called Pharisees and teachers of the law. The second group had concluded that God had no use for the first group because quite obviously they made no effort to live by God's standards of personal behavior. Their lifestyle choices were clearly displeasing to God. Now, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were offended by Jesus. He went out of his way to socialize with these ungodly people suggesting that God did have an interest in them after all. Ironically, both groups were made up of lost people. Both groups included people far from God. The tax collectors and sinners knew they were lost. It was obvious to them as well as to others that they didn't honor God by how they lived their everyday lives. The Pharisees and teachers of the law, however, had no idea they were lost, too. In fact, they were highly offended by Jesus' not too subtle suggestion that their lives didn't much honor God either.

What does it mean to be "lost"? Some of us here today are lost, but we don't know it. It reminds me of a news story that came out of Iceland not long ago. A woman tourist was reported missing after she supposedly failed to return to the tour bus. The driver waited for an hour and then notified the police. Search and

rescue teams were sent to the area, but the rescue efforts were called off at 3 in the morning. Why? It turns out the missing woman had been on the bus the whole time. She even participated in the search for herself. Apparently, before getting back on the bus she had changed clothes and freshened up so the other passengers didn't recognize her. The local chief of police said that she didn't recognize herself in the description of the missing person. She had no idea that she was lost. You can be lost and not know it. You can be spiritually lost – far from God – and not know it.

When something is lost, it's separated from its ideal environment. The sheep had been separated from the flock – the shepherd and the other sheep. The coin had been separated from its owner. Both were lost. People can be lost, too. The ideal environment for human beings is a close, growing, personal relationship with God Himself. But no one starts out that way. In fact, all of us start out life being lost. All of us start out in life separated from God because of something the Bible calls sin. The Bible even compares us to sheep. It says, "All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own..." (Is. 53:6 NLT) That reminds me of the lost sheep in Jesus' story.

What is "sin" after all? At its deepest level, sin is an inner attitude of hostility—sometimes conscious but often unconscious - towards God. The evidence of that hostility towards God is in actual behaviors and attitudes that underline our distaste for God: hatred of others, lying, self-centeredness, stealing, sexual immorality, greed – just to name a few. As a direct result, we live disoriented lives. The sheep got disoriented (lost) and couldn't find its way back to the flock. Lost people usually sense that their lives are disoriented. There's nothing that integrates their lives; nothing that pulls it all together. The reason for that disorientation is the lack of a relationship with God. He's the One who integrates our lives. God is like the hub of a wheel. A wheel without any hub - any center – just buckles and collapses. People without God eventually buckle and collapse, too. Every person without God is lost. And every person who has lived, is living now and will ever live starts out life being lost.

How many of you ever played Hide N' Seek? It's more fun to be a hider than a seeker. Hiders feel like they're in control of the game. Nobody wanted to be the seeker. Nobody wanted to be It. "You're It! But, I don't want to be It! Well, it's your turn to be It!" There's a kind of spiritual Hide N' Seek going on all the time. Do you know who is It? God is It. God is the One seeking those who are hiding from Him. And some folk hide really well, don't they? We like to think that we seek out and search for God, but the truth is that all of us are hiders. Some are just better hiders than others. Each of us has this natural desire to run away from God and hide. All of us have character flaw and areas of spiritual resistance that makes us uneasy about being in God's presence. Do you remember what Adam and Eve did right after they sinned when God wanted to talk to them? They hid. God will let you hide from Him at least for awhile. But the longer you hide from God, the longer you stay lost.

Some of us here today are lost and we need to get found. Could the coin find itself? No. Could the sheep have made it back to the flock on its own? I've had very little contact with sheep, but from what I've read about them, they're not the smartest animals out there. They have a tendency to wander off, get lost and not know how to get back. If the shepherd in Jesus' story didn't find this lost sheep, it was going to die. Jesus says this is the condition of every human being. Left to yourself, you will die. Every person without God is lost. Here's a second fact from Jesus' two stories:

EVERY LOST PERSON HAS GREAT VALUE TO GOD.

That was a new idea for most of the people in Jesus' day and time. No one thought God searched for and sought out lost people. Religious people never said, "... 'there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents.'" (Luke 15:10 NLT) No, the attitude was more like, "There will be joy in Heaven when God obliterates every last sinful person." Both of Jesus' stories make the same point. Something of great value had come up missing – a sheep and a coin. Both were precious and important – the coin to the woman who owned it and the sheep to the shepherd. Jesus is saying that God is like the woman and like the shepherd. Lost people are precious and valuable to God.

Notice something else in both stories. Despite being lost, both the coin and the sheep remain valuable. The shepherd doesn't say, "It's just one lousy sheep. I've still got 99 others. That's just a 1% loss. You've got to expect some loss in any business." Nor does the woman say, "It's just one coin. I've still got the other nine. Is it really worth my time and effort to try and find it?" What's the implication? Every lost person has great value to God regardless of how profoundly far from God he or she may be at any given moment. You never lose your value to God even when you're lost.

Lost people are hiding from God. Their lifestyles displease God. They're rejecting His love and showing no gratitude for all that He's done for them. Nevertheless, they're still of infinite value to God. You don't suddenly become valuable to God when you become a follower of Jesus. No, it's precisely because you always had value to God that you became a follower of Jesus! When you become a follower of Jesus, you can look back and see how much God had been inviting you long before you ever knew Him. He brought a key friend into your life at just the right moment. God might have used a pastor's message, a youth leader's challenge, or a friend's encouragement at just the right time to help you trust in Jesus. The end result was that you got found.

Perhaps that's where you are today. You're being lovingly searched out and sought after by a seeking, inviting God. Yes, you can resist Him and hide. You can stay lost if that's what you want. But,, why? Get found! We give up on most people pretty easily. God doesn't. Aren't you glad that God didn't give up on

you? God loves the people who are still lost out there just as much as the ones who have been found. And when one of those lost ones gets found, all of Heaven rejoices with God. There's joy in Heaven beyond description and explanation. Now, here's a third fact from Jesus' two stories:

EVERY LOST PERSON IS COSTLY TO BE FOUND.

This one lost sheep and this one lost coin warranted an all out search. The shepherd put his own life at risk to go out in the dark looking for that dumb, lost sheep. He could have been attacked by a wild animal and been killed. He could have gotten injured tracking that sheep over the rugged countryside. There was personal cost involved in finding that sheep. The woman who lost her coin had to do more than flick on a light switch. Homes in Jesus' day neither had electricity or that much natural light. Many homes had just one door; a few others might have had just one window. They were dark places all the time. The floors of the homes of common people were just so much packed down earth covered with straw to ward off the cold and dampness of the bare ground. This woman would have had to rake up all the stray, sift through it carefully and sweep the floor. Looking for this lost coin would demand considerable time, energy and aggravation on her part. But its value justified it.

It cost God a great deal to find lost people. That's the central story of the Bible. Jesus, the Son of God, gave up Heaven and whatever it means to operate as God in that dimension and took upon Himself humanity with all of its limitations. But more than that, He freely chose humiliation and rejection by other human beings. But more than that, He allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross and killed because it was the only way that lost people could have their sins forgiven. It's at the cross that God claims lost people for Himself. It's at and through the cross, that God – the Heavenly Shepherd, claims all those lost sheep who have wandered away – and all those lost coins hiding in some dark corner – and who need so desperately to be found. If you're a lost person today – and right now I believe the Holy Spirit will tell you if you are – I want you to take another look at the cross. Imagine Jesus nailed there naked, bleeding, tortured, dying. That's the cost God paid to find you. Please stop hiding from Him. Please get found.

Back in August 1957 four climbers—two Italians and two Germans—were climbing the 6,000 foot near-vertical North Face in the Swiss Alps. The two German climbers disappeared and were never heard from again. The two Italian climbers, exhausted and dying, were stuck on two narrow ledges a thousand feet below the summit. The Swiss Alpine Club forbade rescue attempts in this area (it was just too dangerous), but a small group of Swiss climbers decided to launch a private rescue effort to save the Italians. They climbed up the other side of the mountain and then carefully lowered a climber named Alfred Hellepart down the 6,000 foot North Face. They suspended Hellepart on a cable an inch thick as they lowered him into the abyss.

Here's how Alfred Hellepart described the rescue in his own words: "As I was lowered down the summit ... my comrades on top grew further and further distant, until they disappeared from sight. At this moment I felt an indescribable aloneness. Then for the first time I peered down the abyss of the North Face of the Eiger. The terror of the sight robbed me of breath. ...The brooding blackness of the Face, falling away in almost endless expanse beneath me, made me look with awful longing to the thin cable disappearing about me in the mist. I was a tiny human being dangling in space between heaven and hell. The sole relief from terror was ...my mission to save the climber below."

That's the central story of the Bible. We were trapped, but in the person of Jesus, God lowered himself into the abyss of our sin and suffering. In Jesus, God became "a tiny human being dangling between heaven and hell." He did it to save the people trapped below—you and me. The Christian faith is far more radical than just another religion telling you how to be good in your own power. It tells us the story of God's risky, costly, sacrificial rescue effort on our behalf.

Now if it costs God that much to find lost people, it will cost the followers of Jesus something, too. What will it cost you and me to help God find lost people? It will cost you time and energy. You'll need to start praying for lost people in your circle of relationships, look for ways to build relationships and then point people to Jesus in ways they can understand. It might cost you some rejection or misunderstanding. Let's face it, some lost people are content to remain lost and don't want to be found! It will cost our church something to help God find lost people. What are we willing to do, as a church, to reach lost people more effectively? What are we willing to give up or to change if necessary? Are we willing, for example, to change our worship service? How about some of our programs or ministries? The questions this or any church should always be asking are these: "Are we helping God find lost people? If not, why not? If we are, can we do it better?" Wouldn't it be wonderful to fill up every seat in here today and every Sunday with lost people open to being found, hoping to be found, wanting to be found by our inviting God? A fourth and final fact:

EVERY LOST PERSON FOUND IS CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION.

I invite you to use your imagination. Can you see that shepherd striding back into his village triumphantly with a great smile lighting up his face? Across his shoulders is that lost sheep. The entire village erupts with joy and there's a time of celebration. Or, can you see that little woman her fingers shaking with joy and relief as she reaches down and picks up that lost coin in some dark, dusty corner of her home? Her heart races and she runs out of the house shouting the good news to the entire neighborhood. An instant celebration breaks out there and then. That's how God feels when just one sinner is found. Jesus points that out twice in these verses. "In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God.... In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents." (Lk 15:7, 10 NLT)

That's what happened in Heaven when you trusted in Jesus as your Savior and made the decision to follow Him as your Lord. Every time a lost person is found God invites all the inhabitants of Heaven to join Him in a great cosmic, universal celebration that on this Earth we can't begin to imagine. Write it down. The greatest joy in the Universe isn't when a baby is born or when a couple deeply in love gets married – as wonderful as those events may be. No, it's when lost people – people once far from God – are found, who surrender to God's love and grace, who become children of God, who start to follow Jesus and in whom the Holy Spirit now dwells.

Do you remember back in 2010 how billions of people around the globe were captivated by the story of those Chilean miners trapped underground? I recall Cheryl and I being mesmerized by that story. Thirty-three desperate men trapped beneath two thousand feet of solid rock. The collapse of a main tunnel had sealed their exit and thrust them into survival mode. They ate two spoonfuls of tuna, a sip of milk, and a morsel of peaches—every other day. For two months they prayed for someone to save them. On the surface above, the Chilean rescue team worked around the clock, consulting NASA, meeting with experts. They designed a thirteen-foot-tall capsule and drilled, first a communication hole, then an excavation tunnel. There was no guarantee of success. No one had ever been trapped underground this long and lived to tell about it.

Then on October 13, 2010, the men began to emerge, slapping high fives and leading victory chants. A great-grandfather. A forty-four-year-old who was planning a wedding. Then a nineteen-year-old. All had different stories, but all had made the same decision. They trusted someone else to save them. No one returned the rescue offer with a declaration of independence: "I can get out of here on my own. Just give me a new drill." They had stared at the stone tomb long enough to reach the unanimous opinion: "We need help. We need someone to penetrate this world and pull us out." And when the rescue capsule came, they climbed in. Those who needed rescuing got rescued. The lost were found.

Is it really so hard for you to do the same? No one but God can rescue you and me. He provided the way out of our lostness through His Son, Jesus. I invite you to accept God's gracious invitation today so that we can celebrate with you for all eternity.