

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**  
**REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON**  
**“RESTORING WHAT IS LOST”**  
**Luke 15:1-32**  
**January 15, 2012**  
**9:00 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

Whenever we lose something, we look for it and rejoice when we find it. Why can't we do that with each other? Lost people are not a problem for God. God will seek them out and rejoice at their finding.

Have you ever noticed how lost things seem to possess a life of their own? The lost sock is willfully lost. The lost car keys slink off of the ring in search of a hiding place. I once had a pair of very nice socks. One week, one of the socks was missing. From the hamper to the washer, the sock was missing. I looked in all of the appropriate places; and when that did not work, I looked in all of the inappropriate places. That was a sock that was willfully lost. After a year, when the missing sock had not turned up, I got rid of the surviving sock. Two years later, the missing sock turned up, as we were going through some boxes stored with our Christmas decorations.

Several years ago, at a university dormitory during a summer theology session, one of the professors entered the common dining room, coffee cup in hand, and announced that he had lost his glasses. He enlisted everyone's help to find them. The group scoured the kitchen, looking on every shelf, under every pot, in every inanimate container that might be conspiring with the errant glasses. Then people started checking the improbable places: the floor, the stairs, the rooms—all to no avail.

Finally, some hours later, the professor returned to the doorway of the dining room with glasses in hand, happily announcing, **“Rejoice with me!”** The glasses had been hiding in his car. Because the group had all joined in the search, they all rejoiced with him.

There are no lengths to which we will not go to find the lost things that we need and value. We will turn the house upside down and inside out. We will ask friends to help us search—even though such efforts often lead to embarrassment when we discover the missing car keys in a seldom used pocket.

As human beings, we get lost, too. The little girl crying in the supermarket parking lot fears she has been abandoned, although her mother is just 30 feet away. Weekend travelers can make a wrong calculation with the map. But these are not terribly serious ways of getting lost. A parent is just around the corner; travelers, with a little concentration, can figure out where they are.

Sometimes we get lost without realizing what is happening to us, like the sheep in Jesus' parable that nibbles its way over to the edge of the flock, to discover the succulent grass just over the next rise. Following our impulses, we can suddenly find ourselves out on a limb, and alone. How we get to this position can vary in every single case. It could be the result of our own manner of stubbornness, greed or carelessness. Nevertheless, the results are always the same: isolation, fear, no way back to the familiar.

When we get lost, there is usually someone looking for us; parents, siblings, partner, spouse or friends. They try everything appropriate, even inappropriate, to break through to us. But let me remind you this morning that there is someone else searching, too: one who is persistent and who will leave no stone unturned. This someone Jesus compared to a shepherd who will leave 99 sheep in order to search for one that is lost, to a woman who will use every means at her disposal to find a precious lost coin. This someone is God who is persistent, industrious in seeking out lost people. There are no lengths to which God will not go to find us.

The Pharisees and scribes loved to point fingers at Jesus: ***“There he is, eating with sinners who flaunt the laws, willfully rebellious.”*** But Jesus knew better. Sinners are rather more like lost sheep: scared, lonely, bleating at the empty sky. A sinner is not like the fugitive sock that suddenly tires of your feet and disappears. A sinner is more like that precious coin that dropped one day out of the purse and rolled into a dusty, neglected corner. That is how things happen to sinners.

And just as you and I will turn everything upside down and forego meals until we find the lost wedding ring, just as scores of neighbors will

band together to search the countryside for a lost child, just so is God searching for us. There is no thought of punishment, no intention of yelling at us or teaching us a lesson. No! God simply wants to find us, to gather back the lost with an embrace, and to rejoice.

You cannot blame the sheep for wandering off nor the coin for falling to the floor. Nor is the issue of people being spiritually lost a matter for utter condemnation. Some people are lost. God is going to find them. And there will be great rejoicing when they come home.

As a church, we need to restore what is lost. The elder son begrudged a place at the table for his lost brother. He became angry and refused to enter the house. Anyone who resents God's methods of searching and pursuing those who need to be restored will preclude themselves from the fellowship of the saints.

The father said to the elder son, ***“But we had to celebrate and rejoice!”*** Let us be the church that is faithful enough to forgive and to pursue every possible measure to restore what is lost. That is called kingdom work. If you are one of those interested in the business of the kingdom, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.