

“Finders Keepers”

Matthew 18:10-20

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • February 23, 2014

Have you ever lost something valuable or important? I have. Just this past week I was ready to walk out the door one morning when I discovered that I couldn't find my keys. They weren't in the place where I usually keep them. So I began to look in the other likely places – on the kitchen counter, the breakfast table, the coffee table. They were nowhere to be found. If you've ever done that you know how frustrating it can be. But no matter how frantic I was in looking, the truth is that the keys weren't really "lost." I had used them to drive home and to unlock the door. They were somewhere in the house. I just didn't know where at the moment. The keys were only temporarily lost. On the other hand, a number of years ago I was in a home improvement store and the sweat pants I was wearing didn't have any pockets so I was holding my wallet in my hand. I ran into someone I knew and we talked and at some point I set my wallet down and walked out of the store without it. By the time I realized what I had done and returned the wallet was gone. It really was lost. There was no hope of ever getting it back.

Today's Scripture reading includes what's often referred to as the parable of the lost sheep. Jesus describes a shepherd who has a hundred sheep. But when he counts his flock he discovers that he now only has 99. One of the sheep is lost. So what does it mean to be lost? In Luke 15, Jesus uses this same illustration but with a different meaning. Some people try to point to this as evidence of contradictions in the gospels. Yet this is hardly a contradiction. R.C. Sproul points out that Jesus is an itinerant preacher. He goes around from place to place teaching and preaching. So it's very likely that he uses the same illustrations and sometimes for different purposes. So Matthew and Luke are not recording the same event, only the same sermon illustration.

In Luke's version of the story, Jesus is approached by the Pharisees and scribes who were upset that he was spending so much time with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus uses the lost sheep to represent the sinners who were outside of the Kingdom of God. He says, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Contrast that with Matthew 18 where the lost sheep is one of the "little ones" that we discussed last week, a new believer. It's someone who is already a Christian but has wandered off from the flock. Often times new believers start out with great enthusiasm. So much enthusiasm for Jesus that it can become annoying to people who have been Christian for years. But over time some of that enthusiasm fades and they may begin to "stray" a little. They don't worship every Sunday. They don't read their Bible regularly. They don't minister to other people. In this case the lost sheep is not really lost, only temporarily misplaced. Or as our passage puts it, they've "gone astray."

Let me just point out here that just because Matthew's version of this parable deals with believers who wander away from the faith, that doesn't mean it's not possible for a person to be totally lost. The Bible is clear that anyone who does not have Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord is condemned because of his sins. If you still haven't decided to commit your life to Christ, let me urge you to do that today. Don't wait. Jesus loves you no matter what you've done. In this message, however, we want to focus our attention on those already in the Church.

So what are you and I to do with the believer who has gone astray? The first thing Jesus says is, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones," the new believers. Then he tells us what the shepherd does. The image of God as a shepherd is all throughout the Bible.

Probably the best known passage is Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Psalm 100 says we are the sheep of his pasture. Isaiah 40 says that the Messiah will “tend his flock like a shepherd.” In our Old Testament reading from Ezekiel, God is basically firing the religious leaders, whom he refers to as shepherds. Then God says the *he* will be their shepherd and that he will search for his missing sheep. In verses 12 and 13 of today’s reading Jesus tells us that the shepherd will leave the 99 sheep on the hill and go search for the missing one. What he’s really saying is that if we are part of God’s flock, he will go to great lengths to come find us when we wander off. What a blessing that is.

Every blessing, of course, comes with responsibility. Beginning in verse 15 Jesus tells us that just as he comes searching for us when we wander off, we are to do the same for our fellow believers. He says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.” Some of you may be thinking, “Oh yeah. You better believe I’m going to tell him!” There’s something inside of us that seems to delight in finding fault in others. Sorry, that’s not what Jesus is saying. He’s telling us that the Christian life is a group activity. We go through this life together and we have to get along.

This section teaches us how to deal with a fellow believer that has gone astray. The focus of this section is on what is often called “church discipline.” The problem is that too often we think of discipline as punishment. Rather, what we have here is really a plan of restoration. And every word matters so let’s look at it closely.

The first word of verse 15 is *if*. “If your brother sins against you.” If is not a good translation. A better way might be, “*Whenever* your brother sins against you.” We are all sinners and sometimes we hurt one another. Think of this verse applying to your marriage. If you’ve been married for any time at all you know that at some point there’s going to be hurt feelings and misunderstandings and this passage is a pretty good roadmap to help you

navigate restoring the relationship. The second word to look at is “sins.” If your brother *sins* against you. That doesn’t mean when someone is annoying or forgetful. We’re talking about sin. Here we could define sin as something which violates God’s precepts found in Scripture. The offence must be something contrary to Scripture. Third, the offence must be something that causes you harm. The reason is that the sin damages the relationship and it’s up to those in the relationship to fix it.

If those three criteria are met, Jesus says to *go and tell* the person the fault. Many of us would prefer to sit and sulk, stewing about how our feelings were hurt, maybe hoping that the person will see what’s plainly obvious to us. We might act cold and withdrawn, to help the other person figure out something’s wrong. Instead, Jesus says that when someone sins against us *we* are to go to that person. It may be that the person doesn’t know you’ve been hurt. As the saying goes, “I can’t fix what I don’t know is broken.” We’re not simply to go confront the other person, we are to go lovingly and with both Scripture and evidence to show the problem. At this point it’s important to go and ask questions to clarify the problem. Say things like, “Here’s what I heard you say. Is that accurate?” Or, “what did you mean when you said that?” Most of all, as Paul says in Galatians 6, we are to go with a spirit of gentleness. We are to remember that we are sinners, also.

Finally, we are to go *privately*, “between you and him alone.” If you make the offence public, either by making a public accusation or by gossiping about it, you are making it harder to have a real conversation about it. Remember, the goal is to “gain your brother,” not to win an argument or to look like the better person.

The key to the whole process is the same key to getting in to the Kingdom of Heaven – humility. If you are the person who has been harmed, you must confront the other person with great humility. And if you are the person who has caused the problem, it takes great humility to admit you are wrong and seek

forgiveness. Pride, which is the opposite of humility, will cause us not to listen to the other. If that happens, Jesus tells us to take one or two others with us, presumably people who witnessed the event. If the person still refuses to listen he says we are to take the matter to the church and if he still refuses to listen, treat him as a tax collector or a Gentile. This is the passage that some Christian groups have used as the basis for the practice of excommunication or shunning. Sometimes it may be necessary to restrict a person's access to the church, but more often than not this simply means to stop pursuing the relationship.

At the end of this passage we have some confusing statements by Jesus. In verse 18 he says, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Then in verse 19 he says, "if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven." It would seem as though we could have anything we wanted in life if two of us could just agree. I've actually seen prayer materials that claimed that very thing and had detailed instructions on how to get two people to "agree in the Lord." Some of the confusion comes from the way these verses are translated

into English. It might make more sense to you like this: "Whatever you may bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven." In other words, an actions we take as a church must be consistent with what God has said in his Word. In that case, God will do what they ask.

To wrap this up there are four main points I would like you to take away with you today. First, God cares for you individually. You matter to God more than you will ever know, even if you wander away from him for a while. Second, When you do stray, God actively seeks you out and he rejoices when you return. Third, one of the ways God cares *for* his people is *through* his people. We are responsible for caring for each other in the name of Christ. Fourth, being Christ's body, the church, requires humility. He has made it clear that we can't get into his Kingdom without humility and we need humility in dealing with one another, both when we've been offended and when we've done the offending. Because without humility the relationship can't be restored. Finally, when we treat one another in the way God has prescribed, Jesus has promised to be among us, which is all that we could really ever ask.

Amen