

“People Matter to God”

Date: April 3, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Luke 15:1-10

Theme: Witnessing, evangelism

Occasion: Contagious Christian, series

People matter to God, and they should to us too. That’s what I take away from the parable of the Good Shepherd and the parable of the lost coin. Oh, and there’s one more parable I didn’t read, about a lost son. We call that the parable of the prodigal son.

In each of those stories there is a celebration at the end. The shepherd finds his lost lamb, then calls his friends and says, “Let’s have a party. I found my wandering sheep.” A woman loses a coin, searches the house all over until she finally finds it.

And when she does, she calls her friends to come and rejoice and celebrate with her. When the father greets his son who has been away for some time, his son that he thought was dead, what does he do? He throws a party “My wayward son has come home. Let’s celebrate! Let’s have a party.”

People matter to God. They should matter to us, too. There are some common elements that run through these three stories in Luke 15. The first is that in each of them, something of great value was missing, something that really mattered.

The missing sheep was very important to the shepherd. It represented a significant part of his livelihood. The lost coin was vital to the woman’s survival. Quite possibly she was a widow and what was at stake was a tenth of her entire estate. And it goes without saying, the wayward son mattered greatly to his father.

Jesus is showing us through these three simple stories that people matter – the ones the religious authorities had given up on;

the ones society was looking down their noses at; the people whom others had given up on, written off, and decided God has no use for.

Jesus shows us that these people – the wanderers, the lost, the spiritually confused – actually have value to the Heavenly Father.

When Jesus was hanging on the cross, he was crucified between two thieves. At first they both mocked him, but one of them had a change of heart. He realized, they were getting what they deserved. But Jesus didn't deserve to die. He asked Jesus for mercy. He asked Jesus to remember him, when he came into his kingdom.

He was asking Jesus, "In spite of what I've done with my life, do I still matter to *anybody*?" What did Jesus say? What did Jesus say? Without hesitation he assured this man,

"You matter far more than you can imagine! And because of your faith and your tender, repentant spirit, you'll meet up with me just a little later today in Paradise, where we will be together for all of eternity."

People matter to God, and they should matter to us, as well. But how many times have we written people off – because of their lifestyle, maybe their skin color or what side of town they live on. Maybe we've given up on certain people because of their bad behavior, or we disagree with their opinion. We simply conclude, "I don't have any use for people like *that*."

People like *that* are the ones Jesus died for. People matter to God, and they should matter to us, too. When we realize how much God cares for people, it can cause us to care about them too. No

longer do we see them as categories, but we see their face and recognize them as a person, a person for whom Jesus died.

People matter to God, and He's on a search and rescue mission for any and all of them who have wandered away, gotten lost in the maze of life, become confused and made some bad choices along the way. Who else cares about these people?

The second common thread that runs through-out Jesus' parables in Luke 15 is this: That which was missing is important enough to warrant an all-out search. The sheep got lost, and the shepherd went looking for it. The coin was lost, and the woman cleaned house till she found it.

The father, when his son wandered off, exercised restraint because he respected the boy's freedom, but his eyes kept scanning the horizon, waiting for the day when the boy would come home. When you value something, and it winds up lost, you just naturally want to search for it.

You and I, as Christians, have been commissioned by Jesus to go out and seek for lost souls. God wants us to become contagious Christians – His agents who will first catch His love and then urgently and infectiously offer it to all who will consider it.

This is God's primary plan, the one Jesus modeled with his life, to spread God's grace and truth from person to person, until there is an epidemic of changed lives around the world. It's an exciting adventure to be a part of. And we're all invited to be a part of it.

How can you get personally involved in this exciting endeavor? Well, that's what we're going to be talking about for the next five weeks, both here on Sunday morning and then again on Monday

nights. We're going to be offering practical steps toward becoming an effective carrier of God's life-changing message.

For many of us, sharing our faith doesn't come easy. But it's not complicated. We just need to be taught. But before we commit ourselves to learning how, we need to feel the motivation. What will motivate us to want to share our faith?

There is tremendous rejoicing when a soul returns to God. That's the punch line in each of Jesus' stories. The shepherd found his sheep and threw a party. The woman found her coin and threw another party. The son came home, and what did the father do? – threw him a what? A party!

In Luke 15:10 Jesus says, "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of angels of God over one sinner who repents." When you came to Christ, whether that happened fairly recently or happened 80 years ago, all of Heaven erupted in magnificent cosmic celebration when you gave your heart to Jesus.

There was an enormous party in your honor. And there is one for every person who repents and returns to the Lord. What joy there is in knowing that you and I can be a small part of helping someone come to know Christ.

There is nothing like the adventure of being used by God to contagiously share His love, truth and life to other people, people who matter deeply to Him. So let's get on with it, and become contagious Christians. Amen? Amen!

Sermon derived from *Becoming a Contagious Christian*, by Bill Hybels and Mark Mittleberg; Zondervan Press: Grand Rapids Michigan, 1994; Chapter One - "People Matter to God," pp. 17-24.