

ALWAYS - GOD IS PURSUING
Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch
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TEXT: Luke 15:11-32

Begin with sermon bumper – always pursuing

Lost things! If there is anything I can't stand, it is losing something – anyone else like me? Anyone lost something recently? What are some things that you lose?

Interestingly, surveys show that one the things that is lost most of all - are remote controls! Then there are our cell phones, our keys – and then our glasses.¹

This past summer, I lost not one but two contact lenses! That is an expensive thing to lose. Greg is usually the one to come to my rescue and find the contacts – but he couldn't find them this time. We looked everywhere. What was so incredible was that one of my contacts showed up about 10 days later on the floor of the laundry room. I think it must have gotten stuck on my robe, the day that I lost it and I never saw it until it fell off when I was doing the laundry.

But probably the most frightening of times is when you lose somebody! Some of you will remember the story we have told you about our 3rd child, Nathan, who got lost on a trip to Kansas. It was while we were in Kansas, City for the General Assembly of our church. We had just gone out to eat with a large group of friends and we were walking back to the Convention Center. When we arrived, I looked around for our son Nathan, who was 7 years old at the time, and didn't see him. I asked Greg where he was and Greg said, "I thought he was with you." All the sudden a panic arose in me. We were in downtown Kansas City – we had crossed several streets during our walk – where could he be? We asked our other children, David and Mary, and David wondered if he had stopped to look at those large "fiberglass cows" they had on display that year on the streets and in the parks. Greg and David took off in a run – as fast as they could – to find where he was. And sure enough, that's where he was – a couple of blocks away – still looking at those cows. What an incredible relief it was to see him coming with Greg.

You know, Greg would not hesitate or delay – and would stop at nothing to run and find a child or grandchild who was lost. His love and concern for them is so great.

And truly that is a small picture of what God's heart is like. His love for us – each and every one of us – is so great!

All throughout this month, we have been talking about our *Always God*. No matter how unpredictable and changing our world is – we can be assured that we have an unchanging God who is *always* there – speaking to us – hearing us and seeing us! And today – we are reminded that God is always pursuing us – running after us and seeking us, just as if there was only one of us to search for.

4th century philosopher and bishop Augustine, once said of God: “*You are good and all powerful, caring for each one of us as though each is the only one in Your care.*”² God’s heart is such that He loves us as if there was only one of us – that’s how great God’s love is – and He will stop at nothing to search and find us.

You know the entire Bible is a story of God pursuing us! From the very beginning, in the Garden of Eden, God created Adam and Eve in His image and walked with them in the Garden – wanting so much to be in relationship with them. And then, Adam and Eve sinned and were alienated from God. They were ashamed and they blamed each other – and eventually hid from God. But God went looking for them. And when He found them, He provided for them by sacrificing an animal so that He could give them clothes to wear.

God is always looking for His people – to be reconciled. God takes the initiative – always pursuing – always wanting to be in relationship with us. No matter where we go – He finds us. He will not forget us or abandon us. In Isaiah 49, the exiles in Babylon thought that perhaps God had just left them in Babylon and didn’t care any more about them – He had just forgotten them. But God says: “*Never! Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for the child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you! See I have written our name on the palms of my hands.*” (Isaiah 49:15-16) God loves each and everyone of us deeply – and knows each of us by name. God will stop at nothing to find us and rescue us...so that He can be in relationship with us.

Jesus used the parables of the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep in our Scripture reading today from Luke 15 to teach us that God pursues us and that everyone is important and valuable. Beginning at verse 1 we read:

¹*Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach.* ²*This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!* ³*So Jesus told them this story:* ⁴*“If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it?”* ⁵*And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders.* ⁶*When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’* ⁷*In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!*

⁸*“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it?”* ⁹*And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.’* ¹⁰*In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.”*

Notice the emphasis in each parable on the word “one”. The shepherd leaves the 99 and searches for the one sheep – and when he finds that one lost sheep – there is great rejoicing! Just as there is great rejoicing over the one who repents and returns to God.

And then the woman has ten silver coins – but searches diligently for the one lost coin – and rejoices greatly when she finds it. Just as the joy that is in heaven when one sinner repents.

God is the Good Shepherd and the persistent woman who searches for the one – you and me! He notices when we have wandered away and gotten lost. And He continually pursues us and calls us back to Him.

Jesus went on to tell one more parable. The lost son. Now, we don't have time to read the whole parable today, but you can read it later in Luke 15:11-32. I am sure many of you remember the story. A rebellious son goes to his father and asks for his share of his inheritance. The father was broken-hearted, yet he allows his son the freedom to make this decision and hands him over his portion of the estate. The son takes the money and goes off, into the far country and there he lost all the money in "reckless living."

The son had finally hit rock bottom. He was hired as a servant to feed pigs – which was a great humiliation to a Jew. He was absolutely miserable. But he finally came to his senses – which I think was the Holy Spirit actually nudging him and saying, "This is no way to live. Go back to your father's house, confess your sins and see if you can work as a hired slave there." And so, he gets up and returns home. But while he was still a long way off, the father sees him, and starts running.

Now in the Middle Eastern culture, a man pulling up his robes and running down the road was considered shameful. So why did the father run? To get there to tell the son he wasn't welcome in their home? To lecture him about how wasteful and irresponsible he had been? No – not at all. He ran to show his son his love and welcome. Before the son could say his confession and ask to be hired as a servant – the father was embracing the son and kissing him and calling the servants to plan a great banquet of celebration.

What an incredible picture of God who has been looking for His children with great anticipation – and running with arms wide open to welcome the sinner, who has come home.

You can't read these parables without noticing the value of that which is lost! The lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son – God puts immeasurable value on all that are lost. That is why Jesus came to earth – for a search and rescue mission! In Luke 19:10, Jesus said that the mission of his life was: *"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."* That's how much He loves us; that's how much He values you and me! God decided that He would stop at nothing to take us to Himself – so He gave His very life to save us – so that we might have eternal life.

From Genesis to Revelation – again and again – we see that God is always loving us – always reaching out to us – always pursuing us – despite.... Despite our sin – our failures – our selfishness – our self-centeredness. God is still there – pursuing us – and running to us with open arms, ready to receive us and give us amazing grace.

And He is faithful, even when we are not. When we try to go our own way, God is still there – following us. As Dana Akuri says: *"God pursues us. He pursues us in our brokenness. He pursues us in our mishaps. Despite our rebellion or resistance, He pursues us to the very end."*³

In Psalm 23, remember how that psalm ends with the words: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." That word we translate as "follow" in Hebrew is the word *yirdepuni*...is a word that really has

the connotation of hunting, chasing, or pursuing. So, the verse actually says: “*Surely His goodness and steadfast love will pursue me relentlessly all the days of my life.*”⁴ The Message version of Psalm 23:6 interprets it by saying: “*Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.*” God refuses to give up. From the moment we were born - until the very last day of our lives, God will chase after us – with His steadfast love and unending mercy.

Think of it – the Creator of the universe – who needs nothing – pursues us – and wants to be in relationship with us all our days. As Craig Denison has said in his devotional: “*There is nothing we could do to keep God from pursuing us. There is no sin too great, no distance we could run, that would discourage God from loving us. His greatest longing is for relationship with us. God is after your heart right now. He’s knocking on the door of your heart that you might simply let him in. More than he wants you to do something for Him today, he simply wants you to know He is with you and for you. Respond to God’s pursuit today by giving him your heart.*”⁵

As I close, I want you reflect on what that means to you that God is always pursuing you – and that He is knocking on the door of your heart right now. Will you answer His call?

If you know this hymn, sing it with me:

The Savior is waiting to enter your heart
Why don't you let Him come in
There's nothing in this world to keep you apart
What is your answer to Him?

Time after time He has waited before
And now He is waiting again
To see if you're willing to open the door
Oh how He wants to come in

If you'll take one step toward the Savior, my friend
You'll find His arms open wide
Receive Him, and all of your darkness will end
Within your heart He'll abide

Time after time He has waited before
And now He is waiting again
To see if you're willing to open the door
Oh how He wants to come in

PRAYER

INVITATION

RESOURCES

¹Caroline Biggs, “*Study Reveals the Most Common Items that Go Missing at Home.*”
<https://www.apartmenttherapy.com/study-reveals-the-most-common-items-that-go-missing-at-home-246906>

²Deacon Greg Kandra, “*A Message for Our Time: ‘God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.’*” <https://thedeaconsbench.com/a-message-for-our-time-god-loves-each-of-us-as-if-there-were-only-one-of-us/>

³Quote from Dana Akuri I found on Google Search for Images.

⁴Chris Lee, “God Pursues Us Relentlessly”. August 6, 2017.
<http://www.eastsidebaptistchurchinvercargill.org/latest-sermon/god-pursues-us-relentlessly>

⁵Craig Denison, “God’s Relentless Pursuit”. February 5. First 15 Devotional.
<https://www.first15.org/02/05/gods-relentless-pursuit/>