

Outrageous Love!

A sermon by Joe Hoffman

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Text: Luke 15:1-10

I was in the mood for a movie the other night, and I went to pull one of my favorites from the shelf – The Sound of Music – but I couldn't find it. Instead, I saw the movie Sea Biscuit, and decided I would watch it again. I would imagine that many of you have seen it at some point.

The movie tells the story of 4 characters that have fallen upon hard times. The first is the horse. Sea Biscuit had a father that had been a very famous race horse. Sea Biscuit was expected to follow suit. But early on he didn't show much sign of promise. He loved to eat and sleep – and was seen as being lazy. His owners tried to force him to be what they wanted him to be. They would hit him and coerce him to run faster. In response, he became wild and difficult. He was fast, but he ran all over the track. He had no discipline. No motivation. He was not connected with his passion. Soon the owners lost patience with him and sold him for almost nothing – just to get rid of him.

The second character is the horse trainer. This man was very gifted with horses and animals, understanding how to listen to them, to know them. But it was the time of the depression, and jobs disappeared, and he soon found himself like so many others – without work and heading to California to find whatever might be there to find.

The third character is the jockey. This young boy lives a good life with his family until the hardships of the depression force them also to be on the move. They lose their home and eventually the family is split up. The soon to be jockey is left behind by his family – and he never hears from them again. He feels the sting of being abandoned. His anger comes close to consuming him. He takes an attitude that if someone does you wrong, you do them wrong too. And yet, he has desire and a gift with horses.

And finally, there is the new owner of Sea Biscuit. A man who has known the hard reality of having a child die. His young boy got into the car when the father wasn't around, driving down to the fishing hole to fish, and ran into another car, flipping over into the water. The boy was killed, and now the father must live with the grief that does not go away.

Four characters who find themselves lost in life, not because of anything they did to deserve their lot, but because life brings what it brings. Lost by someone else's intentions of who you should be instead of who you are. Lost in the depths of a financial depression. Lost without family. Lost by tragedy that could not have been anticipated.

In the movie, these four characters find each other. Or are found by the other. They form a team. Each brings a gift that the others need. Together they learn that you don't throw a whole life away because you are banged up a little – or even banged up a lot. Sometimes

all you need is a 2nd chance – or a 3rd chance. But you keep trying. You believe in your own future. You connect with your passion.

That is the essence of the first two parables in the 15th chapter of Luke. Jesus tells these stories that connect with the experiences we all know – of finding ourselves in a time and place we never meant to be in. Of living with realities that we didn't intend nor do we know how to best live with. It happens to all of us. We all find ourselves lost along the way.

On the other side of being lost, Jesus reminds us that we are not alone. He tells of a shepherd who goes in search of the one sheep that is lost – leaving the 99 behind – and at some risk in the wilderness – it is only in an old gospel song that the sheep are safely in the fold, not in the text – but the shepherd leaves the 99 and goes to find the one that is lost. We must hold the tension of this – and ask ourselves – is it foolish or wise for the shepherd to risk the 99 in order to find the one? But whatever we think, the parable calls us into the wildness of God's love for us.

Jesus tells of a woman who loses one of 10 coins – which represents about a day's wages – and how she turns the house upside down to find this lost coin. The parables acknowledge that we all lose things in life. Jesus wants to invite us to a deeper reality. Wherever we are, no matter how lost we may sometimes seem to be, God cares for us and will come looking for us.

And there is no time limit on God's search. The text says that the shepherd and the woman will look until they find what is lost. They will go to outrageous lengths to find the lost sheep and coin. Nothing is too much to do, no distance is too far to go, to find what has been lost.

The ending of the parables talks about repentance. Don't confuse Luke's telling of the parable with Matthew. In Matthew the sheep go astray. But in Luke's gospel there is no straying. The sheep is lost. And maybe I am missing something, but I don't think a sheep or a coin have much ability to sin or to engage in reckless living – at least not with intention. They don't have much to be repentant over. This last part of the parable is really an anticipation of the parable to come – the one we call The Prodigal Son, or the Forgiving Father.

No, these first two short parables are about the outrageous and unending love of God for you and me. And for those we don't know how to love or include in our circle. Jesus chooses a shepherd and a woman, two characters that are not part of the central religious establishment because of who they are in the social system of that time. It doesn't matter to God. There is not an ounce of quit in the God who makes us, blesses us, and loves us. God will come looking for us. God will call our name into the night searching for us. God will do all that God can do to bring us home safely again.

I would imagine that you know this side of God – at least a bit. I would bet that you have been this outrageous yourself. When you have lost something. When a pet has wandered

off. When a child is missing. When you have lost something or someone so important that nothing else matters in the moment except finding what is lost. You know what you do. You do exactly as the shepherd and the woman do in the parables. You go calling into the night. You turn the house upside down searching. There is nothing else that matters until the one who is lost is found.

The hymnwriter calls this grace. Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.

The movie Sea Biscuit ends with these four characters each being found – not only from their initial lostness, but from meaningless wandering through life. The horse becomes a very famous winner against all odds. The trainer uses his unorthodox gifts of knowing horses to bring Sea Biscuit back to his passion. The jockey learns to let go of his anger about his family and still use the gifts they gave him for life. The owner, the father who grieves the death of his son – he finds a way to carry the memory and the grief - and share what he wanted to share with his son with those who are still living. They all find a future – which isn't perfect – but which matters. And they do learn – you don't throw a whole life away because it's a little banged up. Sometimes all we need is a 2nd or 3rd chance. God believes in our future.

Jesus ends these two parables with a big celebration. A big party is thrown. Friends from all over are invited. The joy is too much to keep to oneself. It must be shared. God takes great pleasure in finding the lost and restoring us to fullness of life. And so do all those who seek to be the people of God. We all rejoice in the moment when the lost are found.

God believes in our future. There is not an ounce of quit in God's searching for us. We all need a second chance. We can't just throw a life away because it's a little banged up. I think there is a lot of good news in these words. Amen.