

SERMON TITLE: "Parables of Power: Seeking & Finding"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 15:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 17, 2016, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

One of the unique and delightful things about Ogden is the herd of painted fiberglass horses that appears on the downtown sidewalks every summer. I read in the newspaper this week that the original purpose of the horses was to serve as a trail to direct and lead people toward the Pioneer Days Rodeo. With that information in my head, I have now observed that the horses are facing in a variety of directions. Maybe in the beginning of the painted-horse tradition, they were all facing toward the Pioneer Stadium. But today, they're facing north, south, east, and west. So, I think it might be a bit confusing to try to follow the horses to the rodeo. Anyone who would try to do so would probably end up going in circles and get lost. While the horses display some fantastic artwork that's enjoyable to look at, maybe it would be better to use GPS or Google Maps for seeking and finding the rodeo.

In this month of July, we're thinking about Jesus' "Parables of Power" in the Gospel of Luke. On July 3, we read a parable about investing in the future. On July 10, at our worship service in the park, we gained power from the parable about sowing and growing. Today, we continue with not just one, but two of the parables in Luke 15 that tell about something or someone that is lost and found. Let's examine these Jesus stories and consider how we can be empowered by seeking and finding.

1—BY CLEANING UP OUR OWN HOUSE

I'm going to begin in verses eight through 10, with the parable of the woman who was seeking and finding her lost coin. There I see a couple truths. The first is that we gain power by cleaning up our own house. The woman in Jesus' parable didn't blame the coin for getting lost. She didn't say it was the coin's responsibility to seek forgiveness and find itself. Nor did she look around at her messy house and give up in despair. She didn't say, "Oh, there's no way I'll ever find the coin, so I might as well not even

try.” And she didn’t let herself off the hook by rationalizing that having nine of ten coins was good enough. Instead, she lit the lamp and got busy sweeping the floor.

The woman in Jesus’ story gained power by cleaning up her own house, and, of course, she’s a good example to us. Recently, I needed to find something in my desk drawer, and—believe me—it was high time for a good cleaning. I found things in that drawer that I hadn’t seen in almost three years. There’s nothing like losing a valuable possession to get you to do what you already needed to do: Sweep the floor, sort the piles, and get rid of the junk. When we get rid of the dirt and clutter, we immediately feel better physically and emotionally. We’re more confident and efficient. We don’t waste so much time and energy going around in circles hunting for what’s important. Of course, this applies to spiritual cleaning of the soul, as well as the organizing and scrubbing of our abodes. When we clean up our own house, we gain power.

2—BY RECEIVING AND SHARING THE JOY

A second truth we learn from the parable of the lost coin is that seeking and finding gives us the power of receiving and sharing joy. The woman in Jesus’ story received the joy of a job well done. She felt good about her success. And, no doubt, she was very glad to have regained a day’s wages that had been lost. But the woman didn’t keep the joy of her financial improvement to herself. She also enriched the lives of others. Not one to waste the opportunity presented by a clean house and a found coin, she invited her friends and neighbors over to celebrate with her.

My birthday was this past Thursday. Since my husband Steve had to work until 10:00 p.m., I knew there would be no party at my house on Thursday. So I came up with the idea of having a birthday party right here at the church after bell choir rehearsal. It turned out that Gwenith had just had a birthday the day before and Karen will be having hers this next Thursday, so there were three of us to celebrate. Not only was it fun to sing, blow out candles, and eat cake and ice cream, it was a joy to celebrate our friendship and comradery with the bell choir. Several people said, “What?! You made

your own birthday cake?!” Well, yes, sure I did. I like to bake cakes, and I wanted to have a party. I don’t think we take the time to celebrate enough. It’s powerful not only to appreciate what we’ve sought and found, but also to share that joy with others.

3—BY STEPPING OUT OF OUR COMFORT ZONE

We now move to the parable of the lost sheep in verses three through seven. There we see that we also gain power by stepping out of our comfort zone. In this story, Jesus tells us that the shepherd had 99 sheep with him. Even though 99% is usually considered a very successful number, the shepherd wasn’t going to settle for less than a complete flock. So he gained power by stretching into new territory. The shepherd took some significant risk here. He didn’t have his 99 sheep in a secure pen. Verse four tells us they were out in the wilderness where even a temporary absence of the shepherd could have increased the flock’s danger, and the shepherd’s job was to protect his flock. Yet, the shepherd took the risk of leaving the 99 sheep to go in search of the one that was missing.

The shepherd also stepped out of his comfort zone by going after a sheep *that was lost*. In telling the story, Jesus didn’t explain why or how the sheep had become missing. Maybe it wasn’t smart enough to stick with the herd? Maybe it had gotten hurt somehow, and its injury caused it to fall behind? Maybe it had even been eaten by a predator. Would it be too anthropomorphic to wonder if the sheep had willfully wandered away? Or, would it be too humanizing to wonder if the 99 sheep had somehow shunned and excluded the one? We’ll never know, and probably the shepherd didn’t know either. No doubt, the shepherd would have preferred the ease of a smart, healthy, obedient sheep that would be easily welcomed by the majority. And yet, the shepherd was willing to step beyond his comfort zone to leave behind the 99 sure bets and go after that one uncertain sheep.

As we all know, risk-taking can be good or bad. Fortunately, for the shepherd in Jesus’ story, things worked out well, and he achieved his goal of a full flock. This brought joy to the shepherd, which he was able to share with his friends and neighbors. Through his willingness to reach out beyond his

comfort zone, the shepherd improved his flock and his social standing. In other words, he increased his power.

4—BY PRACTICING INCLUSIVE MERCY & GRACE

Whatever the shepherd's motivation to take such risks for one sheep, we notice from verses one through three that Jesus had a particular purpose in telling his lost-and-found stories. Luke tells us, "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So Jesus told them this parable."

Jesus' purpose in telling the story of the seeking-and-finding shepherd was to help the Pharisees and scribes understand how important it was to practice inclusive mercy and grace toward those who were missing from the religious establishment. We can't be satisfied with those who are already here. We always have to be open-heartedly inviting more. We always have to be considering who else is out there. A smart shepherd knows that for every 99 sheep who are already inside the fold, there's *at least* one other who is outside. And, if we're honest, the ratio is probably more like the nine-to-one of the woman's lost coin story or maybe even like the one-to-one of the prodigal son story that follows.

I read in the newspaper yesterday that, for the first time in a U.S. presidential election, the largest faith-based voting bloc will be those who claim no religion. Catholics, white mainline Protestants, white evangelical Protestants, Black Protestants, and others have all diminished in comparison to the group of people who have no religious affiliation. The demographics of our country and community are changing. There are so many more than one sheep out there. In fact, there are more out there than in here. If we don't look beyond our shrinking demographics, and try harder to include those like the "tax collectors and sinners who were coming near to listen to Jesus," then we're only going to decline further and further. Like the shepherd in Jesus' story, the way we will find our power is by practicing inclusive mercy and grace.

CONCLUSION

Over the past few days, as I was preparing this sermon, I was also watching livestream video of the Western Jurisdictional Conference of the United Methodist Church. United Methodist leaders from 12 western states were meeting in Scottsdale, Arizona. I heard them say things like, “We need more racial diversity in our leadership committees,” and “We need to put energies and resources toward Hispanic ministries.” I totally agree. Our power as a church is very much dependent upon us increasing the colorfulness of our congregations and our leadership. We need to be much more intentional and active in seeking and finding those persons who are missing from our flock.

There’s something else that happened at the Western Jurisdictional Conference. By practicing inclusive mercy and grace, the delegates from the western states elected a bishop who is definitely from outside the fold. Before I tell you more details about the person, I want you to remember what I’ve been saying. Jesus told these lost-and-found parables as a way to explain why he spent time in the company of tax collectors and sinners. Those people, traditionally outside the religious establishment, were coming close to Jesus to listen to him, to participate in his teaching, and Jesus believed that they were valuable and should be included. They were the lost sheep and the lost coin worth taking risks for, worth working hard for, worth offering mercy and grace, and worth celebrating.

The bishop who was elected and who will be appointed to our Rocky Mountain Conference beginning in September is the Rev. Dr. Karen Oliveto, who is an openly lesbian woman who has a legally-married wife. Does that defy what you thought you knew about the United Methodist rules for clergy and bishops? Yes, it does. So this is going to be quite interesting. But, as the leaders of the Western Jurisdiction have done their own housekeeping, they have chosen to gain relevance and power by stepping out of their comfort zone and practicing inclusive mercy and grace. For many United Methodists, this will be a disturbing shock. For others of us, it will be a cause for celebration. Hopefully, as we journey together as a people of faith, this too will turn out to be a parable of power.