

Outflow...Extravagantly Outward

Luke 15:1-10

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Let's begin with a survey. How many of you have lost your keys in recent memory? How many of you have lost your sunglasses? How many have experienced that panicky feeling of misplacing your cell phone? (How many of you have lost patience with this survey?)

Last Sunday we found a cell phone lying in the parking lot with no name on it. To determine the name of its owner, I went down the call history list, starting with the number that the mystery owner called last, saying "Hi, I'm Michael Carey, What's the name of the person calling you?" Kind of odd, right?

As we will see, in Luke 15 Jesus tells three lost and found stories in order to explain his odd behavior. Verse one says,

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Jesus had a problem—he was **attractive to sinners**. Jews who were notoriously immoral were drawn to this holy man. Messed up people are still attracted to Jesus. Many of them know their sin. They have borne the guilt and suffered the consequences, so when they learn of Jesus gracious, healing holiness, they draw close.

Of course, this was only a problem because Jesus' attractiveness to sinners was **frustrating to God's people**...God's **disobedient** people: *"this man welcomes sinners and eats with them."* Jesus' willingness to hang out with riff-raff was scandalous. Usually church people don't experience this frustration because they've managed to hide Jesus' attractiveness, so the so-called "sinners" don't show up at church. Unless the people of a church have become fountains of grace—then we may have to fight some frustration—someone new sits in your spot, takes the best parking places, rowdy kids use profanity in the Beach House, someone in Alcoholics Anonymous leaves cigarette butts on the sidewalk. Jesus' attractiveness can lead to frustration.

But then we remember how much **people matter to God**. Verse 3...

³Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Kenneth Bailey offers help in reading this parable. When he was a missionary in Lebanon; he studied the culture of Bedouin shepherd people, Even 2000 years later, their culture is similar to the Palestinians of Jesus' day.

Bailey says that it would be impossible for one shepherd to take care of 100 sheep, so there were probably several hired men. Most likely, those 100 were all the sheep of that village, it was a communal operation. After counting, the lead shepherd discovered one was missing. That one sheep mattered. The others were cared for, but the shepherd made an all-out effort to find it before it was too late. And as the parable said,

that dust-covered animal had to be carried on the shoulders through the heat. It was costly to the shepherd to restore the lost sheep. Yet the shepherd was joyful, because the lost sheep matters. And not just to him, the lost sheep mattered to the village. Upon entering the town, the shepherd declares, “Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.”

And to frustrated Pharisees; Jesus says, *“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”*

Then Jesus offers a similar parable:

⁸“... suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? Of course she does! ⁹And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’

That one coin really mattered, so she made an all-out effort, and upon finding it, threw a communal celebration. And Jesus said, *¹⁰“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

Jesus drove it home with a final parable about lost sons. Both mattered to the father. After the younger ran off to squander his inheritance, the father’s eyes scanned the horizon. When the prodigal returned, the father ran to meet him...and throw a party. *“Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”* The religiously dutiful son resented his father’s grace and refused to party.

We dare not resent our Heavenly Father’s grace toward others. Every person matters to God. I love the way that Bill Hybels expressed this in his Contagious Christian video. [Videoclip]

We never look eyes with someone who doesn’t matter to God, who doesn’t warrant an all-out search for whom all of heaven wouldn’t rejoice. That really makes me want to be a fountain of grace to my neighbors.

Last summer this congregation gave me a wonderful gift—a twelve week sabbatical in which I could work on my dissertation (which I have recently finished). It was a watershed time for me. Awakening to the reality that a growing percentage of our neighbors will never visit a church, no matter how wonderful its people or attractive its programs, I realized that each of us is called to be a missionary in our immediate community, sharing God’s grace directly with people, not simply inviting them to come to our church. And I realized that I myself needed to learn how to let God’s grace overflow around me.

Over the last five years I’ve read about 90 books in seeking learning about this shift, but let me tell you, this Outflow book has been one of the most helpful of all. This week’s reading gave me these helpful insights.

Outflow to neighbors starts with **attentive presence**. Page 159 encouraged us to pursue a “ministry of noticing” the people around us—notice their expressions, notice their body language, which can prompt our prayer. I guess I shouldn’t just read when I’m eating lunch by myself.

We should practice **neighborhood loyalty**, deliberately shopping at the same stores and eating at the same restaurants and try to get to know the staff and loyal customers. Actually I could have learned this from Lynn. Once I complained about how long she spent at Publix. She could have said, “Fine. You go from now

on.” But she explained that she checks in with someone in the bakery, the meat counter, and a cashier. Many of them share their burdens with her.

God also gives us **inconvenient opportunities**. Did you read about the time the author was stuck at an airport with hundreds of grumpy people and the Spirit prompted him to be a light in the darkness. He closed his laptop and began looking for ways to serve. He started gathering pages of newspapers that others had cast aside, putting them back together and walking around asking people if they’d like one. Among the people he met was a professional musician who had dropped out of Christian fellowship; the conversation eventually became spiritual...two weeks later the musician emailed him a thank you because he had returned to his church. Anytime we have to wait is a God-given opportunity to overflow with grace.

I was intrigued with accounts of **extravagant kindness**, creative ways that Christians brighten other peoples’ lives, which opens hearts to the Gospel. I couldn’t believe the story of the church group that took gift bags to the Hooters’ girls—no...it wasn’t the men’s fellowship! It was a mixed group. They got a grateful reception—what a hoot!

Christian kindness shouldn’t be limited to surprising people with personal gifts. If God calls us to focus on hurting people and broken communities, the best kindness is to work for justice, to protect the weak and powerless from those who exploit them.

We’re also encouraged to “prayer walk” our neighborhoods and ask God to give us a vision of **specific projects** that will advance His Kingdom. Perhaps you and a few other neighbors could organize a street party to bring your neighbors together and jump start relationships that eventually lead to spiritual sharing. Some of our life groups work as a team in blessing the community.

As you grow in those relationships, pray for **spiritual leadings**. Ask the Holy Spirit to give you a sense of when and how the conversation can touch on spiritual things. Sometimes the Spirit will help you discern that you shouldn’t invite your neighbor to church until after you’ve had a chance to talk about spirituality.

More important than bringing people to a church is your **good news sharing**. You don’t have to be a Bible expert to tell people about Jesus, just talk about what he’s done for you, and what he’s doing in you. If they see the beautiful truth of Jesus, hearts and minds will open, your lost neighbors will be found, and heaven will party hearty again!