

The Seeking Life

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The Life of a Disciple Series

Luke 15:1-7

I think every one of us knows the frustration of losing something and not being able to find it. When our children were little, one of them decided they were going to play with our keys. So they climbed up on a chair, we have our keys on a hook, and took the keys down. Then they proceeded to put them somewhere else in the house. I don't remember if they were in pre-school or kindergarten at the time, but Marlene needed to leave and she couldn't find her keys anywhere.

She searched upstairs, she searched downstairs, she searched the kid's rooms, and she searched under the couch. You know how your frustrations grow and you end up searching the same place that you've looked 5, 6 or 7 times before. Maybe this time it will magically appear on the table or under the papers.

She began praying. The amazing thing was that she felt like she should search the dog food bag. And there, underneath about 15 or 20 pounds of Purina Dog Chow were her keys. Now why one of the kids decided to put the keys in the dog food bag I don't know. Perhaps they were planning to make an escape from our home in our car with the dog driving. I don't know what the motivation was. But I do know Marlene's frustration in seeking those keys and her utter joy in finding them in a most unexpected place. Losing things seems to be the stuff of life.

Just recently my wife lost her purse and we searched everywhere diligently and called around to find out if she left it at a store or if it had dropped from the car. We had to go through the time and effort to cancel all of our cards and get all new credit cards. I remember the utter terror of believing; again when the kids were little, that they were playing in the backyard and have one of them wander off. On one particular occasion my daughter had a couple of friends lead her down the street where there was a stream. These three little girls followed the stream for several blocks through a drainage ditch on the other side of a major road and down towards the Olentangy River.

I was searching like crazy for her, just yelling her name through the neighborhood. Someone told me that they saw her and a couple of the girls wandering by the stream. It was an area where there had been reports of a shady looking guy who was harassing little kids. As I ran down the bank of the stream, I had all of these horrible images of my little girl being attacked. I ran through the drainpipe calling her name. I can still feel the terror of having my little girl lost and the joy I felt when she was found.

Recently I read a story of a man named John Johnson who was in his sixties and lost his way in some Northern Minnesota woods about this time of year. He got all turned around and utterly confused even though he was an outdoorsman. An army of rescue workers and search dogs went out after him. One day, two

days, three days searching, calling his name, sounding horns. Sometime in mid-March the snow had melted off but the ground remained real soggy from the winter snows. Let me pick up at the end of the story, here is an excerpt from *Lost in the Northwest Angle* by William M. Hendryx:

Downcast, Johnson prepared for a fourth lonely, dream-haunted night. It was a night that would be followed by another. And another. And then two more. Now it was Saturday. He had endured eight nights, racked by misery and fearful dreams.

That afternoon, Johnson took a somber inventory. *I've had it*, he thought. Maybe if I make a bed, lie down and conserve energy, I might last two more days.

A moment after these thoughts, he heard something. It sounded like the faint crunch of tires on gravel. He cupped his hands to his ears. Was it another illusion? He tried to convince himself it was not.

There! He heard it again. He pushed toward the sound, his heart pounding. It was closer now. He hoped his mind wasn't playing tricks.

Suddenly, as if the Red Sea had parted, Johnson stepped from the dense forest of the Northwest Angle and stood atop a roadway. He took a long, deep breath and thought of kneeling down to kiss the gravel, but he wasn't sure he could get up again.

Johnson was picked up minutes later by a passing motorist and driven to the search command post just after 5 p.m. Marlene, his children, grandchildren and friends flocked around him, amazed at his survival. Hospitalized for 38 hours, he was treated for dehydration, high blood sugar, trench foot and exhaustion. He had lost 30 pounds.

The awfulness of being lost and the effort that people will expend to find that which is lost. Today I'm going to continue the series on the **Life of the Disciple**. I'm calling my message **The Seeking Life**. Let's just ask the Lord's presence.

I want to introduce again the wheel.

If you have a Bible, open up to Luke 15, beginning in verse 1

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."

Then Jesus told them this parable: "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? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

Now the setting for Jesus' story about the lost sheep and this story is followed by a story about a lost coin and then probably Jesus' most famous story or parable – the parable of the lost son – the parable of the prodigal son – which you've heard me say over and over again is my favorite story in the whole of the Bible.

The setting for these three stories, which communicate the same truth about the awfulness of being lost and the joy of being found, is found here in verses 1 and 2. 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."

We need to understand that eating together was a serious matter in Jesus' day and remains so in the Middle East. To invite someone to a meal was an honor – it's an offer to that person of relationship and trust and brotherhood and forgiveness. Jesus' meals with people were an expression of his message and mission. He came to include the least, the last, the lost into the community of the redeemed, of God's people.

It's interesting here that Jesus is not just feeding tax collectors and sinners. In the Middle East you can feed the poor but that doesn't necessarily mean you eat with them. Jesus goes beyond just feeding people, it says he welcomed them – verse 2. He hosted them. This man welcomed sinners and eats with them.

In Jesus' day and in some communities in the Middle East today, part of welcoming another would include a round of compliments. There was some formality to this whole business of having someone in your home and hosting them. Perhaps Jesus was serving as a host in one of the homes of one of his followers.

Typically there would be a round of compliments by the host where the host compliments the guests and tells them his house is honored by his guest's presence. They in turn would respond by asking God's blessing on the house and affirm that they have received honor by being in the host's presence.

As a host, Jesus is actually involved in an amazing statement. He's saying to these people who the religious – the orthodox – folks of the day regarded as the scum of the earth – the dregs. He's saying to this motley group of prostitutes and tax collectors ... He's saying to this motley group of people, I receive honor by your presence in my home. This was just too much for the Pharisees, the orthodox religious church people of the day. How can you receive anything from this miserable rabble who know nothing of God's law, nothing of how to be a religious person.

In Jesus' ministry and his life there is such an absence of speaking from some privileged place – from being on high – speaking down to people. I don't know if you've ever gone to an old church, say on the East Coast in Boston or New York. Especially this you find this in England, in the old Anglican churches. The pulpit, where the message is preached from is maybe 12 feet up in the air. You reach it, I've preached from some of those places, and you reach it from this winding staircase. You're just looking down on the congregation from way up high.

Certainly some of the reason for that kind of construction had to do with the acoustics of the building and being able to be heard better when you're way up high in an age before sound systems. But some of it had to do with the privileged place that the preacher was in. He spoke from being above the people down to the people.

I think that many, many church goers and Christians don't understand that here in the United States we live in a post-Christian culture which means that we no longer have the luxury of speaking from a privileged place 12 feet above everyone else down to the culture, that people will no longer listen to – they utterly reject the condescending tones of many churches and many religious people that care less about the most recent pronouncement by the Southern Baptist Convention or the World Council of Churches.

Jesus models for us a way of reaching people that I believe is so effective particularly in a post-Christian age. He models for us welcoming. You know one of the greatest gifts of evangelism is simply the gift and ministry of hospitality? I talk with so many people who say I'm really not gifted in evangelism or gifted in witnessing.

What they're thinking is I'm not a Billy Graham. I can't speak to stadiums filled with people. I'm not the kind of person that will stand up in a large church service and preach or I'm not a street preacher. I'm a little shy. I'm just a homemaker. I'm just a student ... a single parent ... a mom ... an office worker. If you're not the world's greatest evangelist, how are you in practicing hospitality?

The gift of hospitality is nothing other than the gift of welcoming people. That's what hospitality is all about. Are you the kind of person that can provide a welcoming atmosphere in your home? Are you able to invite someone over to your home and provide a warm experience over a home cooked meal or a pizza that you ordered in?

In a world that is really fractured and lonely, where people are hungering for community and hungering for connection. In a world where people are really cynical about church and organized religion and you hear people, I'm not into "organized religion" – what they mean is I've got really negative images in my mind about church.

The image I have in my mind is perhaps some impersonal institution that maybe filled with bigotry. This institution might be anti-minority or anti-woman or anti-gay. Even when I tried to go to church, I meet this stain-glass barrier. I didn't understand what they were talking about. I didn't understand the worship; I couldn't identify with anything that was going on there.

In a world where people are lonely and fractured and looking for community and turned off to church ... what an incredibly propitious moment in history to revive the ministry of hospitality. Maybe you're not a street preacher or a major intellectual force, but do you enjoy having people into your home?

Are you pretty good at welcoming others? Here's an idea and I especially want to speak to homemakers, moms, single people and students. Instead of having church friends over to your house all the time, how about welcoming into your home some people who are outside the circle of faith. How about practicing your gifts of hospitality the way Jesus did? Who would I have over?

I think of the ministry of international friendships that Rich Mendola and a number of other leaders who go to this church lead at Ohio State. There are several hundred internationals that are involved in something called International Friendships at Ohio State. Rich is always looking for families with gifts of hospitality to simply welcome an international student into your home for a meal.

To befriend somebody from China or Nigeria or Indonesia, to let them know something about what is it like to be in a home of an American and eat American food. Even more, what's it like to be in the home of a Christian and be welcomed by a Christian? Pick up a card on International Friendships in the lobby.

Maybe into your home you'd welcome a co-worker or a fellow student. Sometimes you might want to invite someone with you to church and say to them, Hey, you know, what about if we went to church and afterwards you could come over to my house for lunch? Or we could go out to a restaurant together.

There are so many ways for hospitality to be one of the most effective contexts for sharing the gospel. The Christmas Gatherings that our Women's Ministry here sponsors where various women open up their homes around Christmas time and welcome co-workers in for a little Christmas party or neighbors or family members in for a little Christmas party. Then there's someone who shares briefly about the true meaning of Christmas. What a picture of the gift of hospitality being used for the sake of evangelism.

One of your kids is getting baptized or you're getting baptized. How about throwing a party for yourself and inviting a few friends over? Hey, come watch me get baptized and then come over because we're going to celebrate after.

People love parties. Come up with a reason to throw a party and throw a party and invite some neighbors over. It's getting to be springtime, invite some neighbors over for a barbecue or to come to your kid's graduation party. Maybe invite your kid's schoolteacher over for dinner. Ever thought about that? If your child is in elementary school, how about practicing some hospitality with their teacher. Invite over parents from your daughter's soccer team or your son's baseball team.

You could welcome people at our food pantry by being involved with Fruit of the Vine. You know to practice hospitality, you can't be a Pharisee. The Pharisees were one of the Jewish sects in Jesus' day. The word phrase comes from a Hebrew word, *Parash*, which means to separate. So the essence of Phariseism is to withdraw, to separate one's self from non-religious people so they and their behavior and their language wouldn't contaminate you.

The essence of Phariseism is to be isolated so you don't have to compromise your standards. When you examine Phariseism you find that many of the characteristics which Jesus condemned, is precisely replicated in the modern evangelical church.

The whole business of separating one's self to keep yourself and your kids uncontaminated, to have your little holy huddle. Here's the deal; you cannot practice God's welcome unless you get in close proximity to lost people.

You know Jesus once called himself the Great Physician. Now physicians get really close to sick people not because they love sickness or want to get sick themselves. The reason a doctor hangs with sick people is because he or she wants to create change. I'll tell you, I love being used by God to create change and healing in someone else's life. I love the effects of God breaking into someone's family. Or when God saves a teenager, I love the effects. I love watching God drive confusion out of someone's life and bring direction. I love when I see a person, suddenly, gain a sense of purpose and meaning and get

healed up from past wounds. But you've got to get close to people like a physician would with a sick person. If you are in any way going to model God's welcoming heart, hospitality is a part of that.

If I can ask you an affectionate question, would you say Christian, in your relationship to those outside the faith, your life looks more like Jesus or does it look more like the Pharisees? And would you say, Christian, that you practice your gift of hospitality with those inside the household of God or do you see your life look like Jesus – welcoming tax collectors and sinners.

The text goes on to say then Jesus told them this parable, "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?" What is being pointed out here is the value of one lost person. In this story Jesus talks about one lost sheep. In the next story, Jesus talks about the value of one lost coin. And in His third parable, Jesus tells the story of one lost son. The whole point is the value of just one person.

It's so easy, when you have a crowd, like here at Vineyard Columbus. We have this big church and we're moving into a big facility. It's so easy to lose sight of the value of just one person ... one teenager ... one elderly person. Hey, who cares about the one? Let's concern ourselves with the 99. The value of one ... just one man or woman, one boy or girl ... the value of just one person is a continual theme in the Bible.

God's valuing of us is so awesome that when the writer of Psalms looked up into the Middle Eastern sky and saw the vastness of the stars and the enormity of God's creation and then considered himself, he cried out in Psalm 8, "What is man that You, oh God would be mindful of him?" How can it be, Lord, that in this vast universe that you would be concerned with just one person? But that's what Jesus is trying to communicate.

Bill Hybels, a Christian pastor, in one of his books comments on a conversation he had with an elderly man in a store. Just to make conversation, it was around Easter, he said to the guy, "Are you getting ready to get to church at Easter?" The elderly man said, "Christmas and Easter are the only two days of the year when I don't go to church. I hate the fact that you got all these people who go to church just twice a year, Christmas and Easter. I call them Twicers ... C & E Christians ... Christmas and Easter. I can't stand those Twicers, they're not fooling anyone. They're not fooling me and they're not fooling God. I don't have time for them."

This is the age-old question. Who does God have time for? Who does God pay attention to? Just regular church attenders or Oncers and Twicers. We all have our private little judgments, don't we? I remember one time a number of years ago, standing in the back of our auditorium and watching a couple come in with their kids. This couple was always 25 minutes late. Week in and week out they were late and I remember they came in and I glanced at my watch and had this private little judgmental thought, There they are again coming in late.

The Holy Spirit just absolutely rebuked me in that moment as I was looking at my watch. He said to me, "Rich, would you prefer that they weren't here at all?"

And I said, "No Lord. I'm so sorry. I'm really glad they're here." Who do you judge? Who do you criticize in your heart and say they don't belong here?

But Jesus says that sometimes sheep wander away, they get lost. That's what the Bible description of people is. People are like lost sheep. The prophet Isaiah, hundreds of years ago before Jesus told the story- All we like sheep have gone astray. Each one of us has gone his own way. People are lost.

When you sit down and talk with someone and that person is not following Christ, you can know when you're talking with them that the person you're talking to is lost. No matter how successful they are. No matter how brilliant they are. No matter how convincing they are. No matter how powerful, how good looking, how together. The person you're talking with is lost.

You can count some things when you're talking with someone who's not a follower of Christ. You can count on some things. You can count on the fact that people's deepest needs will never be met by more money or more sex or more food. As you talk with people, remember that people are more than bodies. People have souls and people need something for their soul. Without having Christ in their soul, they are empty. You can count on the fact that when you talk to somebody, they're thirsting for something else to satisfy them.

They may not even know what it is. No matter how much of the world they may have or run or control, without Christ, you can count on the fact that the person you're talking with is dissatisfied.

You give a person 10 million dollars, you give a person a new car, you give a person new clothing, give a person a new house, give someone all the sensuality in all the world, they will come back that night, a week later, a month later, dissatisfied.

Why are so many wealthy people seeking psychiatric help? We're more than bodies, we have souls. Without Christ, the thirst of our soul will never be satisfied. When you get together with somebody, you can count on the fact that their lostness is often experienced as a cosmic loneliness. There is inside of each human being loneliness for God our Father that no other relationship in the world can ever address.

You can have a great marriage. You can be in a room full of people. You can be at a party, laughing. You can be in a big crowd and, this is a universal experience, people are in a big crowd of folks and suddenly they're hit by a wave of what some philosophers call a cosmic loneliness. We Christians understand that cosmic loneliness being loneliness and a longing for a relationship with God our Father.

There is profound loneliness in the suburbs behind all the nice front doors and the gates. Inside the people's 3,000 square foot homes, there's loneliness. And there's profound loneliness in the dormitories and apartments surrounding the campus at Ohio State. People in the inner city, in their apartments and houses are lonely. So are people in India and China and in crowded cities in Africa and Latin America. Folks all over the world, you can count on it, if they don't know Christ, they're lonely.

And many, many people try to escape this feeling of cosmic loneliness. This desperation for connection with God. They try to escape that feeling of

loneliness by connecting with another person, engaged in an endless search for that one right relationship that will complete them.

When you talk to a lost person, you can count on the fact that the person feels guilt and they don't know what to do with it. Along with loneliness and dissatisfaction and emptiness, guilt is one of those universals that post-modern culture seems to have no room for. We do not understand that underneath many anxiety disorders and outbursts of anger and underneath much depression and underneath much insomnia and mental illness and suicidal thoughts is an accusing conscious that gives a person no rest ... that regularly says to a person, you've blown it. Now you've gone and done it – you've sinned.

You can count on the fact that lost people, somewhere, experience guilt. Ernest Hemingway tells a story of a newspaper ad in a Spanish city. The ad simply reads, in one of the local papers, Paulo, all is forgiven. Please meet me at 12:00 noon on Sunday, March 12th in front of the clock tower, downtown. I love you and want to see you again. Your Father.

That Sunday, 39 young men named Paulo show up in front of the clock tower. All wanting to be forgiven by their fathers. All hoping that they're the ones who have been addressed by the ad.

I wonder what would happen in the United States if all the churches one week announced to the nation, "We're gonna have amnesty week. No matter what you've done, how bad you've blown it, why you left church or never went to begin with, you can come back to church no questions asked. You can come back to God." I wonder what would happen if we just proclaimed amnesty for sinners? You can come back. No questions asked and we will welcome you.

Like sheep that have wandered away from the flock, people have wandered away from God and have become lost in their dissatisfaction and emptiness and loneliness and guilt.

If you want to get a picture of the lostness of folks, just examine people's family lives. Ask folks to describe for you what it was like in your home growing up? What were the dynamics? How healthy was it? You will hear story after story that will stand your hair on end of fighting and cursing and violence and drinking – fighting around the dinner table, accusations, marriages that are on the rocks.

I'll tell you, when you get a handle on how lost people are, you absolutely will come to a place of recognizing that there is no ability for you to be affective in rescuing someone on your own. Paul said, "When I came to you, I didn't come with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power." You talk with someone who doesn't know Christ and you quickly realize that intelligence alone won't be able to rescue them. Your logic, your persuasiveness, your arguments are helpful but apart from the Holy Spirit working in this person's heart, all of your discussion will amount to nothing.

The Bible says only when God's Spirit comes is the veil lifted. Only when the Holy Spirit takes what you're saying and uses your words to penetrate people's hearts and minds and breaks down their defenses, only when the Spirit of God is active will anyone be saved. Otherwise a veil lies over people's minds so they can't receive the truth about Christ.

Very often when I'm talking with someone, sharing my faith, I'm uttering quick prayers to the Holy Spirit, Oh God, work here! I like John Wimber's prayer, founder of Vineyard. He said his favorite prayer is "Help!" Help me, Lord! That's a prayer you want to pray.

A couple of years ago I read a wonderful book. If you're interested in great night time reading, there's a wonderful book called *Ship of Gold in the Deep Blue Sea*. It's about a fellow named Tommy Thompson. It's a local guy who grew up here in Defiance, Ohio. He went to Engineering School at Ohio State. He spent over a decade, millions of dollars, hundreds of days and nights at sea and countless hours perfecting search technology. He spent millions of investor dollars and thousands and thousands of hours over the course of more than a decade searching for a steamship named *The Central America* that went down in a hurricane in 1857 and carrying to the bottom of the Atlantic 400 passengers and 21 tons of gold from the California Gold Rush.

21 tons of gold – coins, bullion and gold bars and gold nuggets and gold dust. All floated somewhere to the bottom of the Atlantic. This book, *Ship of Gold in the Deep Blue Sea* tells the story of Tommy Thompson and this incredible adventure as he's competing with all these other salvage operators, fighting with greedy state governments and insurance companies.

Finally he discovers the ship in 8,000 feet of water several hundred miles off the Carolina Coast. He's able to recover the ship and all of its gold. Discovery of the ship and the recovery of the gold were said by Life Magazine, "to be the greatest treasure find in history" – worth something like 400,000,000 dollars.

Here's a man who spent over 10 years to seek a treasure of gold. Then I think to myself, will I cross the street to talk to my neighbor? Will I strike up a conversation with a guy at the gym where I work out? Or chat with a waitress? Or with my barber or your hairdresser? You know our God is a seeking God.

The reason why any of you are followers of Christ today and have been found is because God sought you out. Many of you are familiar with the poem, *The Hound of Heaven*. It begins this way:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat – and a voice beat
More instant than the Feet –
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."
I fled Him

This is the experience of the lost. Not only that we wander from God but we find ourselves fleeing from the Lord who is the Hound of Heaven seeking us out. I can't tell you how many times I've talked with people who have said, You know God was after me for years. I felt pressured to turn to God for years. I felt like He was right at my tail. God kept speaking to me and speaking to me. How relentless, how persevering He is.

Jesus says the shepherd goes after the lost sheep until he finds it. He doesn't give up. Persistence. I'm very encouraged in my own efforts at seeking out lost people. I'm very encouraged by stories from friends in the church about how their parents turned to Christ at age 75 or 80. Does it really happen?

One of my friends on staff, his dad was a real hard guy, very wealthy businessman, used to being in control – real racist fellow. He had an opinion about everything. A couple of years before he died, through this staff member's witness - dad's well up into his 70s – heard the message for 30 years and finally he receives Christ, begs forgiveness. My friend told me there was a dramatic change in his life. One of the changes was he stopped being a racist – instantly there was a break. Hang in there with family member, keep praying for co-workers. God can still work.

Do you know, if we're going to be involved in seeking people, this shepherd risked the health of the rest of the flock to go out and find the one lost sheep. There is a cost in seeking people out. There's a cost of hospitality, of inviting people into your home or taking someone out to lunch. It takes time to be friends. There's no way to be involved in rescuing lost people without paying some cost. Cost in terms of money sometimes or time and energy in answering their questions even when you know that a lot of their questions and arguments are just smoke screens so they can keep running away from the hound of heaven.

Sometimes it's hard and costly to be someone's friend. There's a cost not only in the terms of time and energy and money, sometimes there's a cost of study. If you share your faith in the workplace or in school or over the back fence with your neighbor or over a cup of coffee. You share your faith and people are going to ask you questions that you can't answer. Well I just saw a TV show that said parts of the Bible were taken out by the Catholic Church and they've been suppressed for 1500 years. And they contradict what's currently in the bible but the Catholic Church suppressed it. What about that?

And what about all the people who haven't heard about Jesus? What's going to happen to them? You don't really believe the Bible do you? There are so many errors. When you're faced with a tough question you don't know how to answer you have three choices.

1) You can make up an answer, which is what we often do. You just make up an answer, raise your voice for emphasis to show you're not intimidated. No, there were no books suppressed by the Catholic Church. In fact, they found the entire Old Testament in the original with Moses' signature on it. You can just make something up.

2) Or when you don't know the answer you can resolve to never speak again.

3) Or the best approach, the most honest approach when somebody asks you a question about Christianity or the Bible or God that you don't know, just tell them that's a good question. Tell them there are lots of really smart people who have thought about that question for a long time and you're going to look up what those people have to say because you don't what the answer is. And then go study and find the answer and bring it back.

There's a cost to sharing your faith. Another cost we forget about is the cost of being disappointed a lot. You ask people over to your home or to church and you get ready and you pray and at the last minute they cancel out on you or they don't show up. I can't tell you the number of times Marlene and I have had people just not show up. We've invited them to a Christmas dinner here or Summer Harvest or some kind of event or kinship group and they say they're going to be there and they just don't come.

You try to reach out to lost people and you're going to be often disappointed. But I'll tell you, the greatest price you'll pay is the price of facing down your fears. If there is one obstacle that keeps people from reaching out to lost people, welcoming someone into our home who's not part of the church, striking up a conversation. If there's one obstacle that keeps people from sharing their faith in Christ it is the power of fear.

I've asked people over and over again, what is the major obstacle for you to share your faith? The overwhelming answer when people are honest is fear and awkwardness. People fear being rejected – somehow if they start talking about Christ, they'll be devalued in the eyes of the person who is listening.

Folks are concerned about their imperfections. They fear people won't believe that they're good enough to talk with them about God. People fear being asked questions that they can't answer. They fear the way folks will look at them, family and friends will consider them to be religious fanatics. They fear their own inadequacy. Folks fear a lack of training. People don't know where to start.

They fear the time commitment. Their lives are over committed. Fear is the great obstacle that Satan places in our way that keeps us from sharing our faith. I can tell you every single human being who attempts to share their faith will have to stare down this issue of fear and move forward, praying God help me! Should I or shouldn't I? God help me. I want to say something; I want to engage this person. I want to reach out.

You cannot reach out unless you face down your fears. You say, well Rich, why bother really? It's going to be awkward for the other person and me. It's gonna take time and effort. I'm gonna be disappointed. Sometimes I'm gonna be rejected. I'm gonna look like a fanatic.

Why participate in Jesus' mission to seek and to save that which is lost? Jesus' answer is Joy. When he finds the lost sheep, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders. The only way for you to have maximum joy and satisfaction in life is for you to be involved in the mission of Christ here in this world. I don't care how much you pray. I don't care how much you read the Bible. I don't care how many church services you go to. Your Christian life will never take on the kind of

sense of adventure and sheer joy that God intends for you to have if you're not involved in the mission of seeking and saving that which is lost.

Like I said, you don't have to have special gifts. Your singular gift may be opening up your home and welcoming people. You may not be a good speaker. Maybe the only thing you can do is just tell your story. People love to hear stories that are personal. Tell me why you believe in God. What you've discovered in God.

But brothers and sisters, I'll tell you, if you are a follower of Christ and your Christian experience is flat right now, it's kinda dull, your faith is lost its fizz, I'll bet it's because it's been a really long time since you've been involved in the adventure of seeking and saving someone who is lost. Doesn't matter how mature you are, how much of the Bible you know, if you're not sharing your faith, you're missing the adventure of Jesus.

I have lots and lots of ministry opportunities. I have opportunities to go all over the world and speak. There is nothing in my Christian life at all that compares with the joy of getting to share my faith with someone and seeing them become a follower of Jesus. Nothing compares with that.

On Saturday evening when I go home, my wife Marlene will ask me how did it go? And I love the times when I'm able to say, "Marlene, a teenager just responded tonight to the gospel. God just grabbed a teenager's life. That person is gonna be rescued, set on an entirely different tack for life. It's so great. Tonight I saw a married come forward to respond to the gospel and they were just crying as they went forward. It was so good."

How did the rest of your teaching go? It was okay, but let me tell you again about this teenager. Why should I be involved in this? Joy. For yourself and joy for others. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says rejoice with me. I've found my lost sheep. Do you know how much joy you bring into someone's life if you're the person who introduces them to Christ? Apart from receiving the forgiveness of sins and eternal life – which would be to make the whole deal worth it ... do you know what we give someone as a gift when we bring Jesus to them? The joy of being found by Christ.

I know, just in my own life, I came from a broken home. My home life was very much like the homes of many kids who are growing up today, only it was 35 years ago when I was growing up. My home had these huge emotional deficits. I came into college with huge deficits, huge holes. I'll tell you what, if I hadn't been found by Jesus, I know I would not have a clue regarding how to be a good dad ... a good father to my two kids or a good husband or a good loyal friend or even just a decent, good person.

I wouldn't have a clue as to how to love someone else or how to encourage someone else ... have a direction for my life. I'm able to be a blessing towards others. My conscious is clean. I've been freed up of dozens of terrible habits.

Sharing our faith is all about joy – maximizing the joy of the world ... joy for us, joy for others and joy to God. I'll tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent. I think Jesus is talking about self-righteous people who don't think they need to repent. Everybody needs to repent.

But you know, when somebody turns to Christ we actually get to increase the joy of heaven? What an incredible thing God who is infinite, who is always happy – infinitely happy – it's a good thing that the God who rules the universe is content – he doesn't have bad days. The God who rules the world is a happy God, but in some mysterious way that goes beyond human understanding – when someone turns to Christ, they increase the infinite happiness of God and the angels.

It's all about joy. If you, from the outside, were to look at a young couple that just had their first baby, you might say, "Wow, what a mistake. Gotta get up every night – all the sleeplessness, the cleaning dirty baby diapers, babies fussing and spitting up. We don't have enough alone time anymore. See the expense to buy baby furniture, move into a new house. Why bother?"

The couple would say, "Are you kidding? We have a baby. All the fuss, all the muss, all the cost, it's all worth it! Because of the joy of having a baby." That's what it's like to be used to lead someone else to Christ. You pay the price, you pay the cost ... it's all worth it.

So, will you do this? Will you write down this question? And commit yourself to asking it in your work place, in your gym, when you go out to eat. Get used to saying to the Lord, God, what are you doing in this place? Instead of I'm just here to work, I'm just here to work out, just to eat, just watching my kids at school volunteering.

Why don't you start asking this question, God, what are you doing in this place? I'll tell you what, you start doing that and God's going to open up opportunities to share – the lost will be found and the joy of the universe will be increased.

Let's pray.

The Seeking Life

I. The God Who Welcomes (Luke 15:1,2)

II. The God Who Seeks (Luke 15:3-7)

A. The Value of the Lost

B. The Reality of Lostness

C. The Effort in Seeking

D. The Cost of Seeking

E. The Joy of Finding

i. Joy for Self

ii. Joy for Others

iii. Joy for God