



BelPres Church

Lost And Found

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Like a lot of you, I am a busy person. I think that's true for almost everyone in this church. I observe Sabbath, but I'm still really busy, mostly because of my job. I get lots and lots of emails. I get more requests for my time than I could ever possibly ever meet. And all of that can sometimes feel kind of overwhelming.

But if I am honest, I like it. I like feeling needed. I like feeling wanted. I like feeling pursued.

So when all of that becomes kind of overwhelming, I just remind myself that someday, and I hope it's still a ways away, but someday I won't have this job anymore, and then nobody will email me, nobody will ask for my time, and nobody will listen to what I think about anything. I'm gonna have to preach sermons to my wife, and she's not gonna like that. Some of you have heard me say I had a mentor who once told me there would be four stages to my career. Who is Scott Dudley? Get me Scott Dudley. Get me a young Scott Dudley. Who's Scott Dudley?

We all want to feel wanted, pursued, needed. As kids, we wanted to be picked for the baseball team. We want that person we're interested in romantically to be interested in, want to pursue us. We want the college or the job that we want to want and pursue us. We often want it so badly, we'll sometimes seek it in destructive ways and places, overworking to earn a sense that we're needed, that we matter, that we're wanted, unhealthy relationships, extramarital affairs, on and on and on.

It is a deep human desire to be wanted, pursued, and needed. We're starting a new sermon series called *Unleash Good News* about all the different ways that Jesus is good news in our lives. Because the more we experience the goodness of Jesus, the more courage, hope, and joy we're going to have, and the easier it becomes to tell other people about Jesus. Because sharing the good news about Jesus is not a matter of us trying to force our worldview onto someone. It's simply sharing from our own experience how good Jesus is and how he's been good to us. And that's what we're going to talk about through this whole sermon series.

And one of the ways that Jesus is good news is, in spite of how we reject him and do things our own way, Jesus is God in human form who pursues us again and again and again because he loves us and he wants to be in relationship with us, to heal us and transform us, not just for ourselves, but so that we can be agents of his healing in the world. All of that gets at that deep longing to be wanted and needed and pursued.

And we see this from the very beginning of the Bible. When Adam and Eve have rejected God, sinned, gone their own way, they hide from God. And then the text says, but the Lord God called to the man, where are you? That's God seeking human beings. And that question drives the entire plot of the Bible. Happens very early in the Bible, chapter three, and it drives the whole rest of the Bible. Where are you? Where are you?

God tells the nation of Israel to go show the whole world how good God is. That's God pursuing the world through the nation of Israel. God's pursuit of us culminates when he comes himself in the person of Jesus so that we can know him. The whole Bible is about God passionately pursuing people who are running away from him. That's the plot of the Bible. That's the narrative thread. You are loved, you are wanted, you are pursued.

So, if you have a Bible, open it up to Luke chapter 15, and you can use the table of contents if you want to find it. And we're actually gonna start encouraging you to bring a Bible to church with you, a physical Bible to church with you for a couple of reasons. I mean, first, bringing the Bible might be a subtle reminder. Hey, it's always there. You can read it any day of the week. But also, I think it's helpful to see the whole context of certain passages, be able to underline certain words or certain phrases to go back to later on.

But also, I think there's something spiritual that happens. When we open the Bible, we are opening ourselves up to the Word of God. And you don't have to do this if you don't want to. It's not like you're a worst Christian if you don't. It's

really for you. It's an invitation. And if you don't have a Bible, be happy to help you get a Bible.

And I normally preach from the NIV translation. Yours may be different, but don't let that distract you. Kind of all basically all means the same thing. And I went out and I got me this gigantic Bible, the kind you have to have installed, right? Because I have really bad eyes, and so it's like gigantic print, because I can't see.

So chapter 15 of Luke, Luke 15, it's all about the ways a God who pursues us. Verse 1. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear, I might want to underline the word here, Jesus. But the Pharisees, those are the religious leaders, and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

Jesus welcomed everybody, tax collectors who were ripping off their fellow Israelites, prostitutes who were considered outcasts. He welcomed a Roman centurion who is part of the oppressive colonial army that is oppressing all of Israel, all of which enraged the religious leaders. But as Sergio said last week, in the kingdom of God, we're called to be the ushers, not the bouncers. And Jesus seeks out everyone.

Now, Jesus doesn't approve of their bad behavior, no, but he seeks them to love them and to heal them and to transform them. And if you have a Bible, you can kind of look at the end of the previous chapter, and you see this important thing to remember. The original text was not divided into chapters and verses like our Bibles are, which can sometimes hinder our understanding of what's going on.

And in the chapter 14, the previous chapter, which would have been just back then, one long continuous scroll, right? Nothing dividing it up. Previous chapter is about following Jesus wholeheartedly, which includes obeying him. And that chapter ends, last verse of that chapter, whoever has ears to hear, the hear word again, let them hear. Remember, no break there. It would have just gone on.

Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. This is why looking at context can matter. Who is it that has ears to hear Jesus? Well, it's not the religious leaders, the Pharisees, but he's seeking them too. They just don't think they need him. No, no, it's the sinners who know their need. That's here, Jesus pursuing them.

Verse 3, then Jesus told them this parable. Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. The Bible often compares us to sheep for one reason. Sheep are always running away. And we are always running away from God. Doesn't he leave the 99 in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?

And Jesus says this like it's obvious that a shepherd would leave 99 sheep to go find the one. But his original hearers would have been like, you know, it's the Jesus like, everyone knows that, right? And his original hearers were like, no, everybody doesn't know that, right? Like, like, why would you do that? What if wolves come and eat your 99 sheep? Then you'd have lost your entire flock for one sheep. Your parable is not cost effective, Jesus.

But Jesus says, God is the shepherd who loves us so much, He will seek us even if it makes no sense at all. He is the one being in the universe that did not have to suffer, yet He willingly chose to become one of us and suffer everything that we suffer, death, pain, rejection, hunger, poverty, oppression, you name it, died on a cross to pay the price for our sins so that we could be forgiven. Religion that is not cost-effective, none of that makes sense.

God's love for you is reckless, relentless and costly to Himself. And no other religion makes this claim. In every other religion, we have to get to God through good deeds or enlightenment, which is impossible because He's infinite, we're finite. If we can't get to God, He's going to have to come to us. And only the God who comes to us in Jesus loves us so much that He relentlessly pursues us. No matter what you've done or what you haven't done.

As one of my favorite hymns puts it, prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love. And yet Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God, he to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood. Don't nobody love you like Jesus does.

Verse five. And when he finds it, he joyfully, might wanna underline that word, puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, rejoice, there the joy thing is again, with me, I have found my lost sheep.

I tell you that in the same way, there will be more rejoicing, there it is again, in heaven over one sinner who repents, underline that word, than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent. Not because they don't have any sin, but because he's talking to the religious leaders who don't think they need to repent of anything because they're religious people.

And the word repent originally means to just turn around. Stop chasing significance, feeling wanted, feeling desired through achievement or money or good looks or diets or that one special person or whatever it is. Stop chasing what you're chasing. Turn around and discover that Jesus is chasing you.

Verse eight. Or suppose a woman has 10 silver coins and loses one. That would have been one coin equivalent to about a day's wage. And the implication is this woman is poor, so this is a significant loss. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

And I want to make a point here that in these parables, there's a difference between the sheep and the coin. The sheep wander off of their own volition, of their own free will, of their own decision. The sheep kind of deliberately wander off. The coin just ends up being lost. And sometimes it's not that we deliberately reject God and walk away from him. Sometimes we just kind of drift away, right? We get busy. We stop thinking about him. No deliberate rebellion. We just sort of veer and get lost and find ourselves lost somewhere.

Or maybe someone has been careless with you. Someone was careless with this coin and it got lost. Maybe someone was careless with you. Maybe your parents or your friends or coworkers or fellow students hurt you in some way that caused you to withdraw from God. Or maybe a church hurt you and it caused you to withdraw from God. The sheep wander off deliberately. The coin just gets lost somehow, not necessarily through its own fault.

But this text says God is like a woman. And incidentally, the Bible uses both male and female imagery for God. This is one of the places in the Bible that uses female imagery. God is like a woman seeking a coin that got lost.

And then, verse 9. And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, rejoice, there it is again, that word, with me. I have found my lost coin. In the same way, I tell you there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

And then if you have a Bible, you can see that the very next story is the prodigal son who rejects his father, but his father never gives up on him. The entire chapter is about how God pursues us again and again and again, even though we reject him and run away. And the reason is we are the treasure he values the most. You are, I am the treasure he values the most.

The text says when someone turns to God, he is so overjoyed, he throws a party in heaven, which is an interesting image, right? This party, what is a heavenly

party like? Right? Like lots of people there, maybe some charcuterie trays, with some nice custom cheeses and artisan breads and things like that. Right? Really good bread probably. Right? Maybe a disco ball.

Right? That's how valuable you are to him. If you were walking along and you dropped a dime down a grate in a gutter, right? You could see the dime down there with all the muck and goo and mire. Is your first thought, oh my gosh, I've got to find someone to pry this grate up so I can get that dime? Of course not. Right? It's just a dime. You move on because it's not valuable. We only look for things that are valuable.

You are not some dime God dropped on the ground in the gutter. You are God's thought, blood bought, precious member of his family.

And for a lot of us, including me and I know many of you, the place we try to get our sense of being wanted and pursued and needed and desired is through our achievements, right? Landing the next deal, getting the next A, making more money, scoring the next touchdown, giving a sermon that everybody just loves.

The problem with that way of feeling wanted and valued is what happens when you don't get the A or you don't score the touchdown or you don't land the next big deal or you give the sermon that everybody hates. Hopefully not this one. Well, then you're devastated, right?

Christina and I watched the Steelers-Ravens football game last week, which would determine whether or not the Steelers went to the playoff and potentially a championship. And with only 55 seconds left in the game, the Steelers got a touchdown which put them ahead but only by two points. And then the Steelers kicker missed the extra point. He hadn't missed an extra point in years, but he missed that extra point.

So the Steelers only had a two-point lead, which meant if the Ravens could get the football down to within field goal range, kick a field goal, were three points, the Ravens would win and the Steelers' playoff hopes would die. And sure enough, with only 50 seconds left, the Ravens got all the way down the field into field goal range, and everyone's like, well, it's over. Steelers lose, right?

And Christina and I were talking and I said, man, that poor Steelers kicker, he's going to be like, if only I'd gotten that extra point, right? Then the game would just be tied, and then we'd go into overtime, and there's a chance. He's going to relive that moment for at least the next six months. Why didn't I get that extra point?

But then the Ravens kicker missed the field goal, so the Steelers won after all. And afterwards, when they're all shaking hands and everything, I think probably that the Steelers kicker went straight to the Ravens kicker and said, dude, thanks for getting me off the hook.

That's the problem. If we get a sense of being wanted from achievement, sometimes you don't get the extra point, and then what?

The alternative is to get our sense that we're valuable from the greatest, grandest, most significant person in the entire universe, the only person whose opinion really counts, who loves us so much he relentlessly pursues us and never gives up on you or on me, whether we recognize it or not. You or on me, whether we recognize it or not.

Because there are a lot of things that prevent us from experiencing how Jesus is pursuing us. Our sin can block us from experiencing that. Our disappointments in life, where we feel like, oh man, God's not with me, these things aren't going the way I want them to go. Our busyness that keeps us from taking time to listen and to look for how Jesus is pursuing us.

But he is always pursuing us in lots of ways. He pursues us to the Bible. It's his word to us. That's why it's important to read it. He pursues us to other people. Some of you have heard me say before that when I was an atheist, I had three different jobs in three different years. And in all three of those jobs, I was surrounded by Christians, like in all three of them, Christians running amok everywhere.

And I thought, if there is a God, He must hate me to plague me with so many Christians. But they loved me, and they showed me who Jesus was, and they helped bring me to Christ.

Third, God seeks us through the messes we make. Ever make any messes? Mess things up? Ever? Look back at verse five. It says that when the shepherd finds the sheep, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and takes it home. Shoulders? Why his shoulders?

Well, it's because sheep aren't dogs, right? You can't say to a lost sheep, here, sheepy, sheepy, come home, right? They just run away. They run all over the place. So you have to grab them, put them on their back, tie their legs together, throw them over your shoulder, and carry them home.

I mean, we romanticize the whole sheep thing, right? There's Sunday school pictures, and oh, how nice. The shepherd is carrying the sheep. No. The sheep

was so stubborn, he had to throw it down, tie its legs together, and threw it over his shoulders.

And some of you, so get the metaphor. I do too. Because of my sin, my stubbornness, I have made a mess of relationships, workplaces, messes in my family, and he uses those messes to call me back to himself, to metaphorically speaking, throw me down, tie my legs, and throw me over his shoulder to bring me back to him, if for no other reason than to help me clean up the mess that I have made.

He pursues us through thoughts, pictures, memories he calls to mind. Many Muslim refugees who have become Christians, it's a very common story, say Jesus kept appearing to them in their dreams. He pursues us through worship. He is here, right now. And in this message, and in the worship, in the music, in the community around you, he is pursuing you because he loves you and he wants to be closer to you.

And then also God speaks to us in our pain, pursues us in our pain. Jesus knows what it's like to suffer, and in our suffering, he calls us to himself, reminds us that he is greater than our suffering. Those are the ways, and there are many more ways he pursues us.

So, action step for this week. The action step is this. We've created a journal with a brief exercise for each week, and the journals are in the lobby. It's also on our website. There are some on our app. Get one and do the exercises each week. It'll take you 10, 15 minutes a week. That's it.

And each week, we're gonna ask you to remember a time when Jesus was good news to you in the particular way we preached about in that week's sermon. So, for instance, this week's question is, when have you felt pursued and wanted by God? Ask him to remind you of those times. If you've never felt pursued by him, ask him to show you how he's pursuing you right now, because he is.

And we'll do an exercise like this for each week, so that at the end of this sermon series, you'll have an entire journal of ways that Jesus has been good news in your life, which will equip you to share about Jesus with other people from your own lived experience, as well as just be something that you can look at to encourage you.

So, get that journal, do those exercises, to be reminded over the next 10 weeks, all the ways Jesus has been good news to you.

There's a man in our church named Doug who recently sent me his story, and I'm just gonna read what he sent to me. These are his words.

And Doug said, I was a lay pastor at a church that I helped to start, which eventually closed. That was difficult for me because I felt God had called me to begin that church. When it closed, I lost confidence in my ability to hear his voice. And I was only tangentially pursuing him.

My wife and I had found a home here at BelPres and attended regularly, but in my heart and actions, I was just going through the motions. I fell into a deep depression with suicidal thoughts. And for years, it was a dark time for my faith and for my family. My wife was leading spiritually, and I was just along for the ride, and my family knew it. And I missed the deep personal relationship I once had with God and with them.

When we did the first full immersion baptism Sunday, we sat in our usual spot with my entire family beside me, and I hadn't signed up to be baptized. But one after another, people stepped into the water, proclaiming their faith with tears and with joy. And I sat there thinking, God, am I too far gone? Are you and I done? And I began to cry. Everyone around me was smiling, I was crying. Would I ever hear his voice again?

And then, I heard him. It's not too late. You need to humble yourself and be baptized. And I started to hear it over and over, but I didn't move.

Then Daniel, who was our youth pastor at the time, noticed me and said, Doug, are you good? I said, no. And with a big smile, he said, you're being moved to get baptized, aren't you? Uh-huh. Well, then let's go. Now's the time.

So through tears, I left my spot and my family to obey. And my wife had been watching me break down this whole time. And it was a surreal moment, me confessing my sins silently as Jesus whispered, we're not done.

I was baptized in my church clothes, tears streaming down my face. I re-professed my faith in Jesus before my new church family. I was shaken, overwhelmed, and filled with joy. Joy.

As I walked back to my seat, still crying, my entire family surrounded me and hugged me close. It was in front of everyone, but none of us cared. All of us were in tears. I asked their forgiveness for all the hurt I had caused by not following Christ and for failing to lead spiritually, for being a passive husband and father.

Forgiveness came quickly, and that moment began to heal the damage I had caused to myself and to my family.

There were a lot of ways God was seeking me and pursuing me that day. He used the public profession of others' faith through baptism to stir my soul, the Spirit's presence was tangible, drawing me back to him in a powerful and personal way, even as I wrestled with fear about what others might think. He used Daniel, who spoke a prophetic word to me to call me out of myself to Christ and give me courage to obey.

And through confession, forgiveness, and restoration, God brought me back to himself and to my family. It was a holy moment I'll never forget, one that marked the beginning of a new chapter with Jesus. I'm in tears even now just writing this, thanking God for never letting go of me.

Doug did not deliberately rebel against God. He's not the sheep, he's the coin. Some hurts in life called him to vector away, and he got lost. But as he said in his email, Jesus never let go of him, never stopped pursuing him.

Even before that worship service, through his pain, the way he missed connection with Jesus, I believe Jesus was trying to call Doug back to himself, though Doug may not have recognized it at the time.

And then in that worship service, Jesus reached out to Doug and said, it's not too late, there is room for you at the foot of my cross. And then through Daniel, who noticed him, that's our job as communities to notice each other, noticed and said, looks to me like you need to get in that water.

Through his family who loved him and forgave him, Jesus pursued him and did not let go, and Jesus is pursuing you as well. And sometimes we miss it, because we're pursuing our own things, seeking what only God can give us.

So turn around and you will see that the God that you have been seeking has been seeking you all along.

And as a modern worship song we sang earlier says, there's no wall he won't kick down, no lie he won't tear down, no shadow he won't light up, no mountain he won't climb up, including a hill called Calvary, coming after you and coming after me.

Amazing grace. How sweet the sound. I once was lost, but now I'm found.

Jesus, thank you so much. You are the God who never gives up. Though we richly deserve it, you don't give up on us. So Lord, thank you. And this week, as we do those exercises, help us remember all the ways you have been pursuing us, or if we've never felt it, show us all those ways that you have been pursuing us, loving us, calling us back to yourself.

Lord, there is no one like you. Nobody loves us the way you love us. Nobody changes us for the better the way you can do. Nobody pursues us like you do. So Jesus, in your name, remind us of all the ways you love us and pursue us and change us. And we will give you all the praise and glory in your name. Amen.

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following (note: we use the same scripture reflection questions each week so that we can practice using the same tools over time as we examine different scriptures):

- What do we learn about God's story in this passage?
- What do we learn about our story in this passage?

Talk:

- When have you felt wanted by God even when you were not doing well or felt far away?
- What helped you notice His pursuit (someone's kindness, a moment, a word, a feeling of peace)?
- Who around you right now might feel overlooked and need that same kind of care?

Action Plan:

Review the action prompt below, share any initial ideas of how you might pursue this practice this week.

- Think of someone you know who often gets missed, overlooked, or left alone. Pursue them with love this week, not to "convert," but to be present: text to check in, invite for coffee or lunch, offer a ride, a meal, a listening ear, choose them on purpose. No sermon. No correction. No agenda. Just the same pursuit Jesus showed you.

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Take the challenging

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parts of your conversation to Jesus. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement for the week ahead.