

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon
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Lesson: Luke 15:1-10

One day this past week, I returned home from work and my daughter Virginia was in the living room. She was holding a rectangular refrigerator magnet up to the side of her face, which she calls her phone. “Hello, Virginia!” I said.

She put her hand over the pretend mouthpiece, and she replied, “I’m talking to someone on the phone. Go play somewhere else.” Then she went back to talking gibberish into her phone. Thinking that was pretty odd, I walked to another part of the house, put down the items I was carrying, and then I returned to Virginia to try again. “Hello, Virginia.” I said.

“I’m talking to someone on the phone, Daddy. Go play somewhere else.” So I went and found Pastor Ginger, who had watched the girls that day, and I said, “Virginia is really pretending like she is on the phone. It’s weird.”

“Yea,” Ginger replied, “I had to take a phone call an hour ago and the girls were rowdy. So I told them to go play, and Virginia has been imitating what I said ever since.” I expect that the imprint of this brief phone interaction will not forever shape my daughter. However, I do expect that the sum of the interactions my children have with my wife and me will indeed leave an imprint on them.

Spending enough time with someone that we are supposed to emulate will ultimately influence and shape us. That has been known for a very long time. Across the ancient Mediterranean region, imprinting was the predominant method of how one was educated and how character was developed. You would learn from your

teacher various subjects, of course, but the primary benefit of the time spent with the teacher is having their philosophy on life imprinted on you. The teacher's virtues and character were somehow transferred forever on you. This idea of imprinting was carried into the church, seen when people entered into the community of faith -- called catechumens -- and they were instructed by priests and faith mentors. The catechumens would imitate the virtues and beliefs of these faith leaders, and this imprinting would lead to the students' actual virtues and faith. Surprise, surprise: this idea carries on even to this day here at All Saints with our mentor program of catechism students.

We need to keep this idea of imprinting in mind as we read today's gospel lesson. Not just because it is an underlying factor of the parables, but because Jesus takes the normal idea of imprinting and he ups the ante. It all begins when some religious leaders take a look at who has come to listen to Jesus, and these leaders decry, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." Hearing this, Jesus tells two parables. The first is about a sheep who has wandered off out of a flock of one hundred. In this region of Judea, there are plenty of rocky crags that sheep can climb, and a shepherd would have no luck following a sheep there. There are plenty of predators out there that greatly diminish the likelihood of ever finding a lost sheep... but the shepherd searches anyway. The second parable is about a woman who realizes that she has lost a coin. The description of her searching so carefully and meticulously leads us to think it must be a tremendous challenge to find it... but she searches anyway.

The parables are set up to lead us to believe that it is extremely unlikely, if not impossible, that this sheep and this coin will be found. Neither parable indicates that

the sheep or the coin have any desire to be found. They are simply lost, and they do not even know that they are. So the one searching does so when failure is highly probable. Even the degree of rejoicing that takes place at the end of each parable indicates the vast improbability that anything should have ever been found.

The point of these parables is that God is the one who searches and who finds against all odds. The question hangs there: “Why?” Why would God be like this woman, lowering herself despite the hardship of searching her entire house? Why would God be like this shepherd, seeking out lost sinners through thick or thin, come hell or high water? It is because sinners bear the image of the creator. Each of us has the image of God was imprinted on us. This imprint doesn’t fade away in time or as we lose our way. The imprint of God’s image is enduring... even upon sinners and tax collectors. So to lose anyone is tantamount to God losing a part of God’s own self. God is doing more than merely finding a lost object. When God searches for a lost sinner, it is for the recovery of God’s own image-bearer.

So when the religious leaders look at Jesus and they accuse him of socializing with sinners and tax collectors, ridiculing him for teaching people like that, his response is, “No duh.” Of course he’s going to spend time with them. Of course he is going to seek them out. They bear his image! We find in Luke’s gospel Jesus socializing with sinners, with tax collectors, the rich, the poor, the ones cast aside by society, and even the Pharisees. Why would he associate with any of these people? Why would Jesus associate with any of us? Because every... single... person bears his image.

Even if we have gone astray and we don’t even want to be found, Jesus would still rather go through Hell than to lose any one of us who bears his image. As a

matter of fact, Jesus does that selfless, sacrificial search, and -- as improbable as it might be -- he rises again three days later. I take heart knowing that even when our lives are at their worst, Jesus is there. He's searching for us, finding us, and embracing us, all because that is who he is.

When we see the celebration that Jesus throws upon recovering us who bear his image -- his imprint -- it should give us pause. Pause, because we've done nothing to deserve this. Perhaps we didn't even want to be found. Yet God seeks and recovers us, creating in us a clean heart. Pause, because the image of God is on us and all other people. Even the ones dismissed, derided, misunderstood, mocked, scapegoated, and rejected. Jesus is willing to sacrifice it all to recover them. That should give us pause if ever we are prone to dehumanize any other person. Pause, because God doesn't abandon people even when people abandon God. Pause, because the image of God is imprinted on us, and that image is of one who will go to any length to find the lost. So pause, then enter the celebration with thanksgiving.

We will find ourselves at the table, no longer labeled "sinners," but rather we are called beloved guests. And we are sent out from the table; out to a world of people -- perhaps lost -- but certainly people who -- like you and me -- are forever imprinted with God's image, and God will go to the most improbable lengths and back to find each of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.