

THE MISSION ROAD RUNS BOTH WAYS
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 15:1-10

The lost sheep is found. The lost coin is recovered. Rejoice. Gather our friends. This is a time to celebrate.

There are no more beloved parables in the gospels than these. Jesus the Good Shepherd goes out to seek and save the lost.

These parables have also had a great impact on the church. In the name of Christ this is what we are to do, to seek and to save the lost. That is the impulse of the church's mission.

We use these little parables today to think about the church's mission. You may have noticed that later in the service we are having a "mission presentation" from our friend Jeff Ritchie. Jeff is on the staff of the Outreach Foundation, the Presbyterian agency whose mission is, well, missions—the sending of missionaries to those places in our world where the gospel of Jesus Christ needs to be heard.

That impulse—sending missionaries—has always been central to the life and work of the church. Presbyterians have always put international missions at the top of its priority list. Toward the end of the Civil War, what was then the southern Presbyterian church issued a report. It said: "Our homes are destroyed, our fields are ruined, our land is laid waste, but we must send another missionary to Brazil."¹ In good times and in bad, the church has put missions at the top of the list.

Why have we done that? Why is it so important to send missionaries? There are two ways to answer that question, one a misunderstanding of missions, and the other a new understanding.

¹ This story is told by former GA moderator Marg Carpenter.

The misunderstanding of missions goes like this: We send missionaries because out there are the lost. We're the shepherd, and out there is the lost sheep, many lost sheep. We send missionaries to save the lost.

That way of understanding missions can lead to a dangerous misunderstanding. It says: We're superior to those others out there. We've got the answers, and those poor benighted folks in other lands need our answers.

The popular image is of the Englishman David Livingstone going in the 19th century to what was called "darkest" Africa, carrying European culture along with the gospel to these poor folks who didn't know anything. We're found; they're lost. In this way of understanding missions, the road runs one way, from us to them.

There may have been a day when the mission effort of the church was motivated by such arrogant, triumphalist thinking. Sometimes you still hear Christian groups who speak in that way. But that way of thinking is a misunderstanding of the motive for mission.

Instead, we come at mission with a new understanding. We are guided by these two parables that Jesus told. Did you notice how the passage began? It says that Jesus is hanging out with people of questionable reputation—tax collectors and sinners, they are called. These are people who did not keep the religious laws, and wouldn't be allowed anywhere near a place of worship. And the religious leaders fussed about it: "He's associating with this riff-raff and eating with them." Two groups—religious people over here, rascals over there; members of the Session over here, people sleeping off a Saturday night hangover over there.

So Jesus tells his parable. A sheep is lost. The shepherd finds it and rejoices. Now who does that sheep represent? Our first answer might be to say that it is those sinners. They're lost, aren't they? They need the gospel. The lost are the unchurched. That's one way to look at it.

But maybe there's another way to look at it. Here are the religious leaders, so confident of their goodness, their righteousness. They don't need any repentance, do they? They are taking care of things on their own, thank you very much, quite apart from the need of God's mercy.

That very arrogance makes them lost. They are, as Mark Twain put it, "good people in the worst sense of the word." They miss the party, the celebration, the joy of being found by Jesus the Good Shepherd.

So who's lost in this story? Who are the lost when we think about the church's mission? The first thing I've got to say is that sometimes the one who is lost—is me. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found . . ."

The first thing I've got to admit when it comes to mission is that without the mercy of God I, too, am lost. No arrogance, no sense of superiority, no thinking that I've got all the answers. I recognize in humility that I am lost, and God in Christ has found me. Thanks be to God.

So mission is not first of all our action, but God's. "Simply put, God is on a mission. And conversely, mission is ultimately about God."²

We think of the church in places like the Soviet Union and China during the rule of the communist government. Missionaries were chased out. "In both of these vast countries we have seen the church crushed to a point where no kind of explicit public witness, in spoken or written word, or in service to the public, was permitted. And in exactly these situations, we have seen the marvelous growth of the church through the active power of the Spirit drawing men and women to recognize in this human weakness the presence and power of God."³

So missions is not first of all a human work. It is God's work. When we engage in mission, we are joining with the God who is already at work in Christ. "As the Father has sent me," says Jesus, "so I send you."⁴

Why missions? Not because we're found and others are lost, not because we're the only ones who have the truth.

Rather, we engage in missions because we're in love. We love Jesus, and when you're in love you just can't help but tell other people about it.

We engage in mission because Jesus is our Lord. He sends us, and we will go.

We engage in mission because when we were lost Jesus came and found us. And so of course we want to tell others, near and far away, about how their own experience of being lost can be transformed by the God who searches and finds.

In Christian missions, we dare to put ourselves in those places in our world where we can serve and help. We don't pound people over the heads with our answers. Instead, we seek, by our words and our deeds to live in such a way that finally they come to ask us: "What is the secret of your life?"⁵

² Michael Barram, "The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic." *Interpretation*, January 2007, p. 43.

³ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Co. 1989), p. 119.

⁴ John 20:21.

⁵ Newbigin, p. 134.

The mission road is a two-way street. I may bless others by my efforts, but I also am blessed by them.

When I went with Jeff Ritchie two years ago on a mission trip to Egypt, I discovered that two-way road. I guess it would have been possible for someone to think that we were going over there because we had all the answers and we were going to those who were lost. But that was not the case at all. I'll give you my personal testimony. I was introduced to Christian people who live in a situation much different from ours, where the majority religion is Islam. I discovered Christians who were joyful and courageous and welcoming.

In some ways, Jeff, it was not a very good tourist trip. We only made a quick trip to the Pyramids on the last day of our stay. We didn't get to Luxor and its magnificent temple at all. There were lots of things we didn't see. What did we see? Not to put too fine a point on it—we saw Jesus, in the faces and actions and lives of the people who follow Christ in that land.

What I discovered is what we know in mission: Sometimes I'm the shepherd and sometimes I'm the sheep. Sometimes I'm the guide, and sometimes I'm lost and need someone else to guide me. And all of us together seek to find and to lead one another, because Jesus Christ has been there first, and has found us.

And at the end—big party—because in Christ we celebrate the best word of all: Found, found, found.✠