

LAKESWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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THE HANDS AND ARMS OF GRACE
Luke 15:1-10

Luke's 15th chapter begins with these two observations: "Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him." That's the first, and then we read: "And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" How does Jesus respond to the accusations and also reach out with affirmation to the "tax-collectors and sinners" in the group? Well, according to Luke, Jesus tells three parables right in a row ... all three with the same theme ... something of value was *LOST* and then *FOUND*.



Let me begin with a wonderful story out of the Middle Ages that goes something like this:

It seems people were putting pressure on the Pope, saying to him, "Your Holiness, this is the capital of Christendom. There ought to be only *Christians* in Rome. Let's get *rid* of the *Jews*." The Pope however, replied, "I don't know. Before I do anything, I'll have a theological discussion with the chief Rabbi of Rome. If the Rabbi says the *right* things, the Jews will be allowed to stay. If he says the *wrong* things, they will have to go."

So they invited the Rabbi in. The Pope dismissed all the Cardinals and said, "Rabbi, we are both theologians. Theologians deal in *symbols*. Since we use *symbols* in our communication, let this discussion be entirely in symbols." The Rabbi agreed that was fine with him.

First, the Pope made a large circle with one hand and the Rabbi responded by pointing to him. *Then* the Pope thrust out both arms to the chief Rabbi. The Rabbi responded by pointing to the Pope with two fingers. *Finally*, the Pope looked around for an apple and held it up. The Rabbi went through the pockets of his long caftan and took out a piece of matzoh. The Pope responded, "This is one of the finest statements I have heard of. Of course the Jews will be allowed to stay." And he sent the Rabbi on his way.

The Pope, then, brought in the Cardinals and said, "I don't know what you people have been fussing about. I said to the Rabbi, 'There is *one church* and it encompasses the world.' And *he* said, 'You are the head of it.' Then I said to him, 'There are *two swords*, the *secular* and the *ecclesiastical*,' and he said, 'You hold them both.' And then I said, 'There are foolish people who say the *earth is round*,' and he said, 'No, the earth is flat.'"

Now, the Rabbi went home to his wife and told her, "You know, I haven't the foggiest idea what the fuss was all about. I got in there and the Pope said, 'We've got you surrounded.' And I said, 'But *WE* can get to *you* too.' Then he said, 'We can hack you to pieces,' and I said, 'We can *poke* your eyes out.' Then he took out *HIS* lunch and I took out *MINE*."

Communicating *nonverbally* with our hands and arms can be misleading, if not dangerous, it appears. But there are *many times* and in *many ways* that we *DO* communicate with symbols and most of them are easily understood. For instance ...

- What does this stand for ... (peace)?
- How about this ... (number one)?
- This ... (okay)?
- And this ... (power)?
- And what do we try to teach babies even before they can speak ... (bye-bye)?
- How about this one ... (bad person)?
- Or ... (come here)?
- Or ... (come here now!)?
- How about ... (I love you)?
- Or ... (welcome home)?



I think there is a singular, similar, symbol present in all three of the parables Jesus used: the “*Lost Sheep*”, the “*Lost Coin*” and in the very familiar parable of the “*Lost Son*.” It’s a symbol that *YOU* and *I* need to take to heart, not only for *OURSELVES*, but in how we relate to ALL PEOPLE.



Karen lost one of her earrings last fall. I had splurged on our anniversary a year ago and purchased a couple of diamonds for earrings. The reason was to replace some she had lost a year earlier ... her favorites for a long, long time. So ... last fall she lost one of her new earrings and I didn’t even know it ... she didn’t want to tell me. How I learned of this was when I came in from work one evening and *she threw her arms around me and hugged me ... I knew something was up with THAT display of affection*. Then she told me what had happened ... how she had noticed one of the earrings gone, how she searched and searched the house to no avail, but finally after several days found it ... *in her CAR! It was LOST but now it was FOUND! And Karen was ELATED!*

Why do I tell this story? Because the *POINT* of Jesus parables, the singular, similar, symbol of all three can be recognized in Karen’s reaction.



Jesus first parable was about a shepherd who left ninety-nine *SHEEP* in the wilderness to find *ONE* that had gone astray. Luke says, “*When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’*”

The next was about a woman who swept out her house to find a *LOST COIN* (very similar to Karen’s lost earring). And Luke declares, “*When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’*”

The third example Jesus gives is that of the *LOST SON*. You know the story. When the son finally returns home the father says, “*Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!*” And then Luke says, “*They began to celebrate.*”

Are you beginning to see that singular, similar, symbol emerging? That non-verbal display of joy so evident in the parables ... and in Karen’s response? Luke says upon finding the *Lost Sheep* and the *Lost Coin* ... “*Rejoice with me!*” And then, *can’t*

you just see the father running to greet that long Lost Son with ARMS OUTSTRETCHED and HANDS OPENED in WELCOME and LOVE?

And that is precisely how God loves and accepts US ... rejoicing when we are FOUND ... with arms outstretched, running toward us always, welcoming us home. That singular, similar, symbol I want you to see today are those HANDS and ARMS ... OUTSTRETCHED in LOVE... ever ready to EMBRACE ... always prepared to REJOICE.



We have seen that symbol of the LOVE and ACCEPTANCE of God in an even more powerful way than in parable form. What about THIS ... (*arms and hands outstretched on a cross*)?

Think about those hands for a moment. They are pierced hands, bloody hands, pained hands. And they are spread in a gesture that TAKES IN ALL THE WORLD. On that cross of Golgotha, God was saying to YOU and ME, God was saying to the world, "I love you this much!"

For, whose hands are they? The One who allowed himself to go to the cross because he believed so much so in his message of loving and living and being ... his message to us that WE TOO ARE TO LOVE and LIVE and BE ALL THAT GOD WANTS US TO BE ... God's Son, outstretched arms, hanging pierced and bleeding from a cross, making the ultimate sacrifice ... "For God so loved the world!" "For God so loved the WORLD!"



We probably have trouble understanding that kind of love. Our concept, our experiences of love, are never like that. We live in a world where we are rewarded for doing good and punished for doing bad. We grew up hearing that if you want something, you have to earn it, work for it, fight for it. That reward system of thought has always been with us:

- If we work and get good grades, we will get into the best colleges and get our degrees and earn big bucks.
- If we brush our teeth and floss everyday, we will have good teeth and gums.
- If we please our employers, we can get a raise.
- And the list could go on and on and on.

But God takes that system and turns it upside-down and inside-out. On the cross, the HANDS and ARMS of GRACE spread out to encompass the WHOLE WORLD. God says, "You can't earn this. I'm giving it to you. Here is my Son who is going to die so that sin and death won't have to threaten or worry or frighten you anymore. It is my ultimate sacrifice and you don't deserve it. But I love you this much!"



The world, you know, doesn't understand that grace.

They don't understand the cross. For them, it's a symbol of failure, of defeat, of mockery, of pain, of death.

They thought they were doing away with a troublesome Jew and that would be the end of it.

"Ha!" shouts God. "HA!" And three days later, the world heard that shout through the echo of an empty tomb. The CROSS and the HANDS and ARMS of GRACE took on a new meaning.

Now, instead of a symbol of torture and pain, we carry it as a symbol of VICTORY, of God's POWER, of HOPE and SALVATION, of God's LOVE and ACCEPTANCE ... for YOU and for ME and for all the WORLD.



The reality is that the Pharisees had not even considered that God might actually *LOVE* the *LOST* ... that God might actually *CARE* about *EVERY ONE OF US* ... sinners and tax-collectors. Are we *LOST*? *SURE* we are. We don't ever like to admit it. In some circles, it's not *fashionable* to talk about. But the Biblical witness is that we're *LOST*. That's what these parables are all about, not *sheep*, not *coins*, but about *SONS* and *DAUGHTERS*. *WE* are the *LOST*!

However, if you are sitting here in this sanctuary this morning then the Good News is ... you've been *FOUND*. *LOVE* has reached out to you, in *GRACE*, through those *OUTSTRETCHED HANDS* and *ARMS*.

★ But folks ... here's the *kicker*. Jesus' *POINT* in telling those three parables was to explain to *US* that the *best way to make God happy* is to *FIND* someone who is *hurting*, *lonely*, *desperate*, *out of relationship with God* and bring that *LOST* one home.

You see, Jesus is painting his *BEST PICTURE* of what God is like ... and what God wants *US* to be like. In these parables, Jesus is showing us *dramatically* three great things about God and His love:

- First, that God's Love is *INCLUSIVE* and that God wants *US* to be *INCLUSIVE IN OUR LOVING*.
- Second, that God's Love is *FORGIVING* and that God wants *US* to be *FORGIVING IN OUR LOVING*.
- And third, that God's Love is *SACRIFICIAL* and that God wants *US* to be *SACRIFICIAL IN OUR LOVING*.

Yes, the whole point is that in order to please our God, *we are to make a difference in other peoples lives* ... find the *LOST* and *WELCOME* them *HOME* ... to be the *OUTSTRETCHED HANDS AND ARMS OF GRACE*.



Now, I've got to tell you, that the perception outside these walls is quite to the contrary though. In this post-Christian era in which we find ourselves, those *outside our walls* don't want to be *FOUND*. At least, not by *US*. *For some reason, they don't perceive our concern as real*. Some anonymous cynic put it like this:

- I was *hungry* and you formed a humanities club and discussed my hunger, thank you.
- I was *imprisoned* and you crept off quietly to your chapel in the cellar and prayed for my release.
- I was *naked* and in your mind you debated the morality of my appearance.
- I was *sick* and you knelt and thanked God for your health.
- I was *homeless* and you preached to me of a spiritual shelter of the love of God.
- I was *lonely* and you left me alone to pray for me.
- You seemed so *holy*, so *close* to God, but I'm still very *HUNGRY* and *LONELY* and *COLD*.

That hurts.

So what are we going to do about it?

What are we going to do about it?



I'm going to attempt to answer that question in a series of sermons I'll be preaching the next three Sundays on the church. So you'll have to wait for the answer.

But for now, I don't know about you, but I thank God for those *ARMS AND HANDS OF GRACE*, for they have welcomed me many times when I have been *LOST* and *HURTING*.

Look at that cross, my friends.

Those *HANDS* and *ARMS* welcome you, too.

Amen and Amen.