

*Cost/Benefit Analysis*

Lessons: 1 Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

Luke has spent several pages recalling Jesus' encounters with the demands of discipleship, his clear calls to the cost of following. And then Luke turns the page to tell us why the cost is worth it. Jesus gives repeated parables to tell us that something is more important than the cost.

We find three illustrations about lost things – a lost sheep, a lost coin, and two lost sons. And he tells us about the searchers: a shepherd, a woman, a father. All three share common qualities that become lessons about God and about us in the reality of grace. They move without a moments hesitation to start seeking, and show love's willingness to pay the cost of searching. They keep seeking until they find, and they are all overjoyed in the delight of the finding. There is a joy in the finding that is beyond the counting of the cost.

Notice how none of these stories spend time evaluating whether the lost items were worth the search. Coins are just objects. Sheep don't act sorry and ask for forgiveness. The father was not interested in listening to the returned son's confession. The joy is the finding – not in the necessity of repenting.

Grace does not count the cost of the search, and grace is always glad in the finding!

A group from Northwood went down to Haven of Hope Friday evening to worship. What a really great facility! The whole facility is a real investment in compassion. The planners and funders and organizers have created an example of grace at work, of not measuring the cost because of the celebrating the finding.

There were children everywhere. The homeless of America are families, not just the mentally-ill vagabond on the highway. We were met by the sounds of children's laughter and energy. They were playing soccer on the fields, wearing their bright yellow "US United" t-shirts.

We bribed them in the old-fashioned Presbyterian way, with homemade cookies and Capri Sun drinks. They sat on the floor of the chapel, and colored pictures of the Good Samaritan while I talked with the adults. We read the story and talked about how being kind means "going the extra step to do what is needed the way we think Jesus would do what is needed."

The adults spoke up and said that was easier said than done, in a homeless shelter like Haven of Hope or anywhere. There were people in the place who were hard to get along with. But they agreed that Jesus would be kind to disagreeable people, and Jesus told them not to walk by on the other side. Jesus even told them to be kind to their enemies.

After all, all of us have been thrown by life into some ditch at one time or another, and we have needed someone to go the extra step.

There are lots of ways to be lost. Maybe we are not homeless, but we have felt lost and alone and we have cried out for help. What have you lost? Lost a job, ...lost our health, ...lost a child, ...lost a spouse, ...lost a friend, ...lost a marriage, ...lost, lots of ways to be lost. And we have all lost something important enough, worth enough that we have not counted the cost before we started the hunt.

I lose things. I focus on what I am doing, and lay something down and can't find it. I lose my cell phone at least once a day, and sometimes have to call the number and listen for it to ring.

Sometimes I lose something more important – more valuable, enough that I am not counting the cost of the loss or the hunt. I just want to find it. Often I can't find what I have lost. I hunt and can't find it. I don't think about how much the hunt cost, and to be honest, I don't really ever give up the search. I may go on to other tasks, but I keep thinking the thing will turn up. Often it does when I am not really searching at the moment. And when I stumble onto it, I am surprised and glad.

Grace does not care why the coin is lost, why the sheep strayed, why one son runs and the other sulks. Grace does not count the cost of the search and grace never quits searching. And when grace finds a need, grace celebrates! God is love, and God celebrates every time grace finds the lost. We come in to a safe place, lost in some way or another, and we connect to grace – because a Savior is always seeking the lost – looking for us!

We live in a culture and a country that is not very good at celebrating these days. It seems we are always afraid that we might lose something, and we spend even more time thinking a lot about what we have lost and wish we still had. We hold on to things we have, and we hesitate to take the risk to find the things we have lost.

We are always counting the cost and risk – and trying to avoid both. We want to get things without it costing us. We want to do things without losing anything. It's true in personal life or in business or in large enterprises. We call it “cost-benefit analysis.” And what we mean is how much it might cost us to give a benefit to someone else. Politicians are good at pushing the “no new taxes” button. They know we want benefits without paying for them. We want benefits that someone else pays for. We certainly do not want to pay for benefits to anyone else. We don't want to lose anything we have – especially to give someone else something they might need.

Last Friday night, I thought about how many people in our country and culture spend a lot of time trying to find a cheaper way to deal with the homeless. Most towns try to move them to the next town. Many cities have better jails for criminals than refuges for the homeless. The law requires minimal decency for the arrested, but the helpless are left to charity. Most citizens don't want their taxes raised to get a child off the street and into a safe place.

The SAMM Shelter is a “metropolitan ministry.” Many now may know that SAMM was started by First Presbyterian Church two days after a homeless man died from the cold in the church yard on a Thanksgiving Eve. Ordinary church members did not think about the cost. They started feeding people in the Fellowship Hall that night, and one good thing led to another. We celebrate what the work of grace has done in building a Haven of Hope, but think how people who have served meals there at night or stayed overnight as monitors are filled with joy to see the numbers that have been found.

I have some good memories of SAMM shelter through the years. And I have one bad memory...

In the mid-90's, SAMM was just starting a "transitional housing program." They were expanding beyond the overnight shelter to help families get a "re-start." They were seeing more and more families who lost roofs over their head through no fault of their own. So, they bought the property on Blanco that had apartment units for families. But they ran into problems at the public hearings. The good people in the neighborhood didn't want "those people" in their sheep pen.

I will never forget an Express-News front page photo of an angry man. He was shaking his finger in the air yelling, "I worked for everything I've got."

How stupid can anyone be! It's an American myth, and it is a lie. No one works for everything they've got. He didn't pave the street in front of his house, or build the power plant that makes the electricity for his lights. He couldn't make the Freon chemical for his air conditioning. He probably didn't have the skill or the money to get most of what he got.

Truth is none of us have much of anything that we got on our own, or earned completely, or deserved. We all depend on others, need each other, live together better than we could live alone. In fact, in sanctuaries where we admit we depend on God and grace, we confess that we all live "by grace alone." We are delusional and depraved to think we make it on our own.

In his fear of losing something he had and his anger over needing others, that man on the front page forgot that grace meets needs before it counts the cost. I'll never forget the look in that photo. There was not a trace of happiness on his face or celebration in his soul.

Jesus knew that grumblers miss the celebration. Jesus knew that people who are always worried about losing something they have can never be happy about someone else gaining what they have lost.

We learn this truth from the twist in the lesson from scripture: Jesus is talking to Pharisees. They thought they are part of the "found" – not the lost. They were the 99 sheep in the fold, the large coins in the treasury. They thought of themselves as the good son, laboring away at home.

Jesus told them he was "sent to the lost house of Israel." The Pharisees were the ones Jesus was seeking. But they could not celebrate being found even when they were face-to-face with the Savior, because they couldn't admit they were the lost sheep of Israel.

Churches are always be "in hard times" and still giving grace. Churches are usually good at having faith and taking risks. Churches are a good place to remember that cost-benefit analysis really means what it cost God to save us, and how little it cost us to share good news and compassion. We can always spend a lot of time – maybe waste a lot of time – thinking about what we had that we have lost instead of hunting for the places where grace can be found. Churches can look at budgets and spend their money trying to keep things they have already lost, or they can focus on what they are called to seek and find – and put their energy and passion and time and money into the hunt.

I think scripture shines a flashlight in the darkness of our lostness. When we look at Jesus, we see pretty clearly that we will always find grace in places where there are children, in places

where the homeless huddle, in places where the sick struggle. That is work enough for grace to do, and those are generally the places where joy and celebration come with the finding. We watch children color a picture in Sunday School or at SAMM shelter, and we smile. We ask homeless people their names, and we feel more sensitive as persons. We visit in a hospital room and walk away with deeper faith and gratitude. What is interesting to me is that these are the places where we can become so focused on meeting the need with kindness that we lose our fears of the cost and we get caught up in the celebration of seeing what God's grace – working through us – can do through us.

Grace doesn't count the cost of the search and grace never quits searching. And when grace finds a need, grace celebrates! God is love, and God celebrates every time grace finds the lost.

Christ knew the cost of finding the lost, but he was not focused on the cost. He was concentrating on the seeking and the finding. God was overjoyed when we were found, and God is overjoyed whenever we help in the finding. Knowing the joy and celebration with God that comes when we do the finding, why would we ever hesitate to count the cost of the hunt?