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The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 17, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him, and the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

A shepherd with a hundred sheep. He loses one lamb. He's a good shepherd. He cares for his sheep. But he still loses one of them. How many hours pass before the shepherd notices the missing lamb? When you have a hundred sheep to watch, it could take hours before you discover that a lamb is missing. It could take hours if not days longer to find the lost sheep.

People are far more valuable than sheep. People get lost as well as sheep. Hours may pass before you discover a child has been missing. I took 22 teenagers to Dorney Park this summer as part of their Great Escape experience. I told them, "Don't go anywhere by yourself. Travel two by two. Be back here at the pavillion at 3 p.m. Does everybody hear? Check in at 3 p.m! Is that clear?" By 3:30 p.m. everybody checks in. Everybody but Terrell. "Where's Terrell?" "Nobody had seen him." I began to panic. I remember a newspaper story. Several years ago a boy ^{A Park worker} drowned in the wave pool at Dorney Park. ~~They~~ discovered his body at the end of the day ~~by a worker~~. He'd been missing for hours. Nobody noticed his absence. Hundreds of people, maybe thousands, were in that pool. But he drowned. Fear and panic took hold of me. *concerning Terrell*

I spent the next hour scouring the park. I went to the wave pool. No

Terrell. I had 21 other kids to watch out for. I forgot about them. I just wanted to find Terrell. All kinds of exciting rides but they had no appeal to me because I was so concerned about Terrell. All I could think about for an hour was Terrell. Where is Terrell? Terrell showed up at the pavillion about 5:30 when he got hungry. I was in his face screaming. He said he couldn't remember anybody saying anything about checking in at 3 p.m. After my burst of anger, joy. I spent the next several hours riding roller coasters with Terrell.

It's so easy to overlook people. So easy to lose people. *even when you love* It's easy to assume people are present in this worship service when, in fact, they're absent. Some people don't come to the worship service ever week: some have to work; some are traveling; some are sick; some are visiting other churches; some are visiting ~~dieing loved ones; some are just sleeping — for whatever reason some people don't~~

come every week. They are especially easy to lose track of. About 20 people present last week are absent this morning. Who are they? About 20 of you who are present this week were absent last week. The average attendance stays about the same - but the people are different. Someone asks, "Where's John and Mary Doe?" We answer, "I think they were here last week. I'm not sure. This is probably their off Sunday." Weeks or even months pass before somebody says, "You know, I haven't seen John and Mary Doe all summer. They haven't been hear for months." By that time John and Mary are most likely irretrievably lost. It's so easy to overlook people until their irretrievably lost. *espec cally when you*

dealing with a lot of people —
I want to demostrate to you how difficult it is for a shepherd to keep track

or anyone ^{to work}

of a hundred sheep. I actually want to show you how difficult it is for a minister to keep track of all the members in the congregation. Look at this serving tray. It has 100 items on it. It represents people who worship with us every Sunday. Our average attendance is actually close to 170 people a Sunday. But each of these items represents one of you. Here's a rubber band. A lot of people who come to worship are very flexible. They enjoy having their faith stretched to the limit. Here's a ping-pong ball. We have a some worshippers who bounce back and forth between churches. Here's a CROP button. Some of us believe that the best way to express our Christian faith is through social involvement. Here are a bunch of plastic communion cups. They all look the same. Some of you come as a family. Maybe five of you together. When I see one of you, I sometimes falsely assume the rest of you are here. Here's a balloon. Some of you really enjoy a good time. You'd like the worship service to be a little more lively. And here are a few dinosaurs. Each one of these items represents a worshipper. If I lose a few balloons, one or two dinosaurs, a communion cup, some paper clips - how long wil it take for anybody to really notice what's missing?

I'm going to place this tray at the back of the fellowship hall. Take a close look at it. I hope nobody steals any of the items on it. Touch and handle but ~~you~~ please don't take anything. I challenge you to a contest. Look carefully at everything on this tray. ~~Later~~ today I'm going to remove some items from that tray. I'm going to put some new things on the tray. I'll give a candy bar ^{next week} to anybody who can tell me what's missing and what's new. If nobody comes up with the right

answer, I get to eat the candy bars.

I'll give you a hint as to how you can win the prize. It'll take a lot of work on your part. Tedious work. Time consuming work. Make a list of every item on the tray - the color of the item, the size, and other distinguishing characteristics. Make a list: five communion cups, one duck sauce, a safety pin.... Next week, look carefully at every item on the tray again. Look at each item, one by one. Compare your list with the items on the tray next week. You'll discover new items. You'll discover some items are missing. *That's the only way one person can do it. It's true consistency.*

People aren't things. We can't really compare a paper clip to a person for whom Christ died. We're far more valuable than anything on this tray. If anything on this tray gets lost, it's not really that important. But the stakes are much higher when it comes to real flesh and blood people - especially when it comes to our relationship to Christ and one another. If keeping track of 100 things on this tray is difficult - how much more difficult to keep track of all the people in this congregation unless we have a plan - unless we really care about individuals - unless we're really willing to take the time and effort to notice people as individuals and then go out and find them.

I told you one way to notice the missing items. One person carefully notes and keeps track of every item. Actually there's another way; a more effective way. Another way is to have a buddy system. When I was a Boy Scout I learned that we should never go swimming alone. You always went swimming with a buddy. Every once in a while, the patrol leader would blow a whistle and yell out,

"Buddy check". And you'd find your buddy, and raise his hand. That's the way the church should be. The best way to know if someone is missing is to develop a buddy system. In the buddy system you're not responsible for keeping track of all the people in the church. You're responsible for keeping track of just one person. One of the main responsibilities of the sponsors of new members is to be a buddy. You come to church and you try to notice whether or not the people you sponsored are present. And the new members also look for their sponsors. Both sponsors and sponsees shepherd one another. It's nearly impossible to keep track of the average of 170 people who worship here every week. But it's easy to keep track of one person. What if each one of us reached out to one other member and became responsible for that person. Each one, reach one.

There's still another way of finding lost sheep. On Sunday, October 29, following the 11:00 worship service the Membership Development and Evangelism Committee is preparing a light lunch for shepherds - for people willing to be officially recognized as a shepherd, willing to visit members over the next year, willing to meet together periodically, maybe once a month, to discuss how the visiting and searching is going. Consider being a shepherd! Consider going out to look for one lost sheep. It would be wonderful if each one of you could see yourself as a shepherd.

Bow your heads and ask the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, if he's calling you to be one of many shepherds of this congregation. Will you consider attending the lunch on October 29. Will you consider calling on one or two members a month?

at the coming
of the Holy
Spirit, God
power & love
over

You seek the lost, O God, exultant you bring home the found.
Touch our hearts with grateful wonder at the tenderness
of your forbearing love: Grant us delight in the mercy that
has found us, and bring all to rejoice at the feast of forgiveness, We
trust in our Lord Jesus Christ, your son, who lives & reigns with you