

February 14, 2010

Bethany UMC

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Sermon: *Bethany Outflow* Message 4: "Extravagant Outflow"

Scripture Lessons: Luke 15:1-2, 4-32

Key Verse: "Let us feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive, he was lost and is found."

Welcome to Outflow, Week 4. It seems like it has been forever since we were last together, so just in case you have lost track of where we are in our sermon series, or maybe this is your first time with us let me bring you up to date on where we are and where we want to go today. We are in the midst of a five week sermon and study series called "Outflow". A study designed to help us think about our biblical calling to make disciples by allowing God spirit fill us up, flow out of us into the world around us. It's about how to practice everyday outreach for everyday people; everyday. Our key passage for this series is Acts 1:8. In this verse Jesus give his last instruction to his disciples before he is taken up into heaven. He said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in al Judea and Samara and to the ends of the earth." To help us remember that, we are using a four tiered fountain that symbolizes God's Spirit gushing up within us and overflowing into our lives, (Jerusalem), to our family and friends, (Judea), to the community, (Samaria) and to the world, (ends of the earth). This week we are looking at the third tier, the community around us. That outreach to our community is what I am referring in my sermon title, Extravagant Outflow. ***The point is that God wants his extravagant love to flow out from us to our community.***

Let me ask you a question. What is the most extravagant thing you have ever done? Turn to someone close to you and briefly tell them what that was. ....

For some, an extravagance might not mean a lot of money; it might be buying a pair of new shoes, just because you wanted them, or paying a bit extra for some upgrade or creature comfort, or the latest iPad, or ITouch. For some it may be a fishing boat or a special vacation. The one that came to my mind was a trip Sylvia and I took to Scotland three years ago, and if that wasn't enough I paid an extravagant amount of money to play a game of golf on the legendary Old Course at St. Andrews, the home of golf.



Of course, extravagant is a relative word. What I see as extravagant may look miserly to someone else, especially if you are among the world ultra rich celebrities. For example, rock star Bono, discovered while getting ready for a concert that he had forgotten his favorite hat. To get it in time for the performance and to insure that it did not get crushed during shipment he spent \$1,700 to have it flown in from London via British Airways in it own box in a first class seat. Of course, if you browse the tabloids at the checkout



counter you can find all sorts of examples of such extravagance.

Even so, not all extravagance is bad or foolish or sinful. For example, when Jesus promises us abundant, overflowing life in John 10:10, he's talking about a lifestyle so extravagant in spiritual power and generosity that people can't help but notice. God wants us to love lavishly, rejoice exuberantly, fellowship joyfully and live abundantly! And...God wants us to be extravagant in seeking his lost sheep, his lost coins, his lost prodigal children.

That is what the three parables in Luke 15 are all about. One theologian I know call this chapter, "God's lost and found department." Jesus told these three stories because they reveal a God who consistently demonstrates an extravagant compassion for us...his lost sheep, and coins and prodigal children. Let's look quickly at the points Jesus is trying to make.



In the parable of the lost sheep, the math doesn't really add up. Does it make sense to leave 99 sheep worth maybe \$10-15,000 to find one worth \$100-150? Bushwhacking through the rocks and brambles looking for one wayward sheep may not make much economic sense, but it's the nature of caring to take risks, to discount the cost.

Perhaps Jesus is asking, "Do you Pharisees, or in or case, you churchgoing folk, really care about people out there, or are you just focusing on yourselves." The question we need to ask ourselves is do we really believe that the folk who aren't part of the fellowship of Christ worth our effort to love them and invite them to join the rest of us recovering lost sheep. Do we believe the story of Christ and his redeeming love is good news to be shared? This parable says yes to both questions and do you remember what happened next, after the lost sheep was found and returned to safety? According to the parable, the first thing the shepherd did was gather all his friends and neighbors for a party. (Now, let me give a heads up here. If you think church should be somber and reserved you may not like these Jesus stories because at the end of every one there is a party going on.) God wants us to rejoice in every person's return to the family.

Both the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin highlight the need to put genuine, natural caring into practical action. But they also highlight the joy God wants us to feel in helping people turn toward God, even when those people are nothing like us. This is a true joy...a richness and fulfillment we will never know if we remain in what Jean Valjean, in *Les Miserables*, a dry happiness.

God is so excited about the return of every one of his lost sheep and lost coins and prodigal children that he's throwing a party here every Sunday, with singing and

instruments and dancing and laughter and fellowship and forgiveness and we can share that excitement by inviting our family and friends and community to join us in celebration.

What we do here every Sunday is an extension of the same party the shepherd and the woman held, and there's only one way you get in. You have to be a lost sheep, or a recovering lost sheep. We are all here to celebrate the extravagant love of our Shepherd, who risked everything to bring us home. The truth is that we who are church people are no better or smarter than any other lost sheep. Someone just loved us enough to bring us here a while back. It's like the theologian and Oxford scholar, C.S. Lewis said to a friend who was a new Christian. "Think of me as a fellow patient in the same hospital who, having been admitted a little earlier, could give some advice and encouragement."

This church exists today because someone embraced God's vision for the people of Ellicott City. Through the years thousands of folks have claimed the name of Jesus because of the ministry here. God still has a heart and a vision for the people of this community and God wants us to embrace that vision.

The parable of the prodigal son helps us to understand that God desires to see his extravagant love and compassion flowing out from the church into the community. When the younger son demanded his inheritance early, he displayed a selfishness that was not only arrogant but hurtful. In essence, he was saying he wished his father was already dead. Sadly, every human being, except Jesus, has done essentially the same thing at one time or another. The Bible says that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. In doing so, we are saying to God, thanks for everything, now leave me alone while I do it my way.

But the father in the parable watched for his son's return. He hoped for it, prayed for it and when he finally saw him coming he was practicing I Corinthians 13 kind of love that is patient and kind, that doesn't keep score and rejoices when truth wins out. But most of all it never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful and welcomes the prodigal with forgiveness and openness.

My friends, God's love, the kind showed by the prodigals father, the kind described in I Corinthians 13 is really the only thing we have going for us. I mean, the programs and publications and events are fine and have a place, but the only thing that will draw people home to the Father is love. When and if we operate from any other motive, people will know it. When we genuinely love and clearly demonstrate the father's love people will embrace it and they will want to join in the celebration.

By now you might be saying to yourself, "Gee, this extravagant love and outflow sounds like a tall order." Jesus is calling us to offer the people in our community a level of friendship, authenticity, and transparency that's not natural to most of us. Left to our own, we tend to be much more like the angry, jealous older brother than the extraordinarily forgiving and generous father.

Jesus doesn't want us to fake it. People aren't stupid; they're sensitive to subtleties that reveal how we feel about them. So, they know if we are just putting on a show, or have something other than their best interest at heart.

Therefore if we are going to be genuine in our outflow, we may need to start by asking God do a little work on us, to change us, to transform us, to give us hearts like his. The good news is everything the Father has is ours...even his extraordinary love for lost people. Jesus said, "I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. So then, the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." He also said, "Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you." That means if we ask, seek and knock, he will fill our hearts with that kind of love. When it comes to outreach, asking usually means praying for a compassion that is greater than we have. Seeking usually means to look for opportunities to serve people that we wouldn't normally notice. And knocking means touching people's lives in practical ways.

Jesus tells us something important in these stories about the shepherd's lost sheep, the woman's lost coin, and the father's lost son. They remind us that all of us know something about being lost, about how precious it is to have someone searching for us and helping us make our way home again, about how every human being is an object of affection in God's eyes.

Let me share a brief story with you about a pastor named Steve. I think the story will help drive the "big idea" for today that **"God wants his love to flow out from us to our community."**

*Pastor Steve was frustrated with the pressures of trying to encourage his church to reach out to their community. As he sat at his desk contemplating what to do, he realized he was hungry and decided he would take a little break and find a bite to eat. Steve got into his car and headed for the Taco Bell/KFC just up the road from his church. In a brief, quiet moment between shouting his order into the microphone and getting to the pick-up window, God spoke to Steve. It wasn't an audible voice, just a nearly imperceptible mental whisper.*

*"Steve", to voice said, "open your door. I have a present for you."*

*Feeling a little silly, Steve arrived at the window, feeling a little silly; he nonetheless put the car in park and opened the door. Ground into the pavement was a scarred and tarnished penny. "Gee, thanks!" was the sarcastic thought that went through his head as he dug the seemingly insignificant coin from the asphalt. But then God's quiet voice spoke again.*

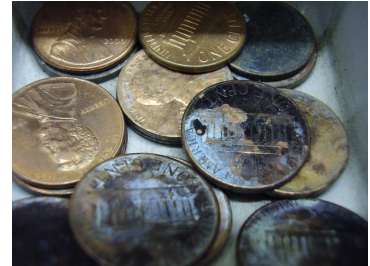


*"In the world's eyes, a lot of people in the community you're trying to reach are like this penny. They are flawed, faded, imperfect and often overlooked; a lot of people see them*

*and just walk on by. Even church people don't see much value in spending time reaching for them. Through some eyes, Steve, they may look insignificant, not very valuable, but to me they are just like you. They are precious beyond measure."*

*As Steve headed back to church with a bag of burritos, and a shabby old penny, tears began to well up in his eyes and a whole new understanding of the incredible value God places on the broken, bothersome, infuriating people we all are.*

*Later on, Pastor Steve said, "You know, it's a funny thing. Since that day, I have often been tempted to get angry or blow people off with a few brief words. Then I will look down on the ground and find another penny. I now keep a whole stack of them on my desk to remind me of God generous heart and of the special calling he's place on my life."*



The truth is that from time to time we all need to be reminded of the prime mission, "to make disciples who experience God and live the Christian life together." Sometimes we need to be reminded of the extravagant outflowing love of God that makes it possible for all of us "lost sheep" to be found and welcomed home. As we close today I invite you to share in two acts that will help us remember and practice extravagant outflow. First I invite you to come to Christ's holy table and share in this meal of extravagant love; love poured out for you and for me, for the forgiveness and sin and for the whole world. Second, I invite you to penny person. After you have received the communion elements you will see some baskets with packages of pennies...we invite each of you to take some with you this morning. Take them home as a reminder to love lost people in practical ways. Then, every time you ask, seek and knock, and you have an opportunity to share the love of God with someone, say to yourself, "that may have only been a penny's worth but it was valuable in God's eyes, because that person is valuable. Then I want you to bring that penny back to church (and maybe a bunch more) and put it in the jar in the narthex. I challenge this parish congregation to fill the jar with thousands of pennies, each representing some intentional act of sharing the love of Jesus, by Easter Sunday, 2010. Finally, invite you to share the stories of your coin collecting. Tell your spouse, or your friend what happened, tell your GIFT Group, your Circle, your committee. Put it on YouTube, Facebook, or MySpace. Post it on our website, or send an email to me or any of the staff. You will be amazed at what God is going to do.

Let us pray. **(To take risk for the lost, to search diligently for that which is valuable, and to transform us from older brothers into having a heart like the Father's.)**