

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“The Heart of the Matter: A Searching Heart”  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
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Isaiah 41:17-20, Luke 15:1-10

Abraham’s life was going nowhere fast. Growing up in a poor Hispanic section of East Los Angeles he had found himself in trouble with the law early and often. He had joined a gang, dropped out of high school and been in and out of Juvenile detention. If anyone had been giving odds, they would have been overwhelmingly in favor of his ending up in prison for most of his adult life. Yet something happened to Abraham. He is now a high school graduate and is attending community college. He has been selected for a special month long learning opportunity at Oxford College in England. He has met the Queen of Sweden. And his goal is now to go to UCLA law school and become an attorney in order to help kids like he was. So what happened? How did this come about? The answer is that someone listened to Jesus. But in order to understand this we have to return to our story.

Our Jesus’ story this morning begins with Jesus teaching, which is nothing out of the ordinary. What is out of the ordinary though are those who are being taught. Jesus was teaching those whom most of us would not invite to a dinner party. He was hanging out with sinners and tax collectors...or as we might think of them...homeboys, or for those of us from South Texas, the cholos. These were the people that respectable people avoided. But there were other people there as well...the religious elite known as Pharisees. They were scandalized by Jesus’ new found friends and began whispering about how inappropriate this was. What I love about Jesus is how he responds to their campaign. He tells stories.

The first story is about a shepherd who has had one of his 100 sheep wander off. The shepherd leaves the other sheep and heads out to find the lost lamb. When he finds it he throws a party. The second story is about a woman who loses a coin and spends a great deal of effort trying to find it. And when she finds it she throws a party as well. Both of these may seem like strange stories. Why would a shepherd care about one sheep? Why would a woman care about one coin? For those listening to Jesus the answers would be obvious. For the shepherd, he would care so much because the sheep are not his. Shepherds worked for other people and were responsible for every, single animal. He had a duty to find it. The woman needed the coin because it probably represented her entire life savings and was perhaps the only thing that might save her family from starvation. The sheep and the coin were of almost incalculable value. The gift of these stories was that they made everyone think, not just about lost sheep and coins, but about God. They made them think about God because everyone knew that Jesus was not just talking about a shepherd and a woman, but he was talking about God; the God with a searching heart. The God of Israel was always the God who came searching for God’s people. God searched for them when they were slaves. God searched for them when they were exiles. God searched for them when they had wandered off again and again and again. And God searched for them because God loved them; because they were of incalculable value. And now God had sent the messiah to bring them home. They got it that God had sent Jesus to gather God’s people and not just the perfect people, but all of the people including the homeboys and the cholos; the sinners and tax collector; you and me; every person on

the face of the earth because each of us is of incalculable value to God. It was this God who found Abraham.

This God with a searching heart found Abraham through the work of Father Gregory Boyle and Homeboy Industries. In 1988 Father Boyle and his parishioners knew something had to be done about the rising gang violence around them in inner city LA. So rather than asking for more police and prisons, they started a program to love, cherish, teach and train gang members so that their lives might be turned around. And they did so not simply to help bring peace, but because they believed that each and every one of those young men and women were of incalculable value to God. Over the years Homeboy Industries has become the world's largest gang intervention, rehabilitation and re-entry program. Each year they help more than 10,000 gang members to turn their lives around. This is how Father Boyle puts it, "If ours is a God who is too busy loving us to be disappointed in us, then imagine what that means for your ministry or being. And imagine, if ours was a God who didn't want anything from us but only wanted for us, then suddenly, all these walls and doors are opened." This was what Father Boyle helped Abraham to understand...that God had been searching for him and that the walls that had constrained Abraham were now broken down.

This morning I have two challenges for you. The first is, as you take the bread and the cup, to remember that you are of incalculable value to God; that God has been searching for you and that there is nothing you could have ever said, done or thought, that can change God's love for you. Second, to ask yourselves, how am I partnering with God's searching heart to go searching for those who like Abraham, need to be found?