

# The Cross of Christ: The Substitution of God

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[ 0 : 00 ] Welcome to another Sermon on the Web from St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver, Canada. You are free to use this mp3 audio file and to redistribute it to others without alteration and without charge. After the sermon, listen for more information about St.

John's Shaughnessy Church and the St. John's website. The following message is from the October 29, 2000 service at St. John's Shaughnessy. The Reverend David Short delivered his message from the book of Luke, the 15th chapter, verses 1 to 7. The title of the message is Finding Joy.

Again, welcome to you if you're a guest this morning. And we are going to turn back in our leaflet to the passage Luke chapter 15, an incident in Jesus' life. And you may find it helpful to have that open in front of you. The reason I want to look at Jesus, of course, is because Christianity is Jesus Christ. You'll be thankful to know that Christianity is not a system of rules or a philosophy. And you should never confuse it with the institutional church. Christianity is the person of Jesus Christ. And when we open this passage this morning, we find that Jesus is in trouble again.

One of the most extraordinary things about the adult life of Jesus is that he's almost always in trouble. He's in trouble with his family. He's in trouble with the local clergy. He's in trouble with his followers.

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[ 2 : 30 ] that just did not fit comfortably with the religious observance of the Pharisees. And what annoyed them so much was not that Jesus spoke as though he was God in the flesh, nor that he did many mighty miracles without their permission, though that was bad enough.

The problem was that he did these things at the wrong times, in the wrong places, with the wrong people. I mean, he cast out demons in the middle of a church service, something very un-Anglican. He healed people on the Sabbath, the day of no work, not just once or twice, which might be overlooked, but repeatedly as though he was making a point. He reached out and touched lepers. But worst of all, he seemed to be spending an inordinate amount of time with the wrong sort of people, and that's where we pick up the story. In the first two verses we read, Now the tax collectors and sinners, and by the way, tax collectors have never been rehabilitated.

I mean, in every culture, tax collectors remain the same. Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to him. I'm sorry if you work in Revenue Canada. That was an unfair shot, and you can get me back at the end of the year.

[ 3 : 46 ] Let's go back to the passage. The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. But the Pharisees and scribes, the clergy, murmured, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.

So the problem for the clergy was not so much that Jesus was just spending time with these people. He seemed to like them. And what galled them was that Jesus wasn't treating them with the dignity they obviously felt that they deserved.

He wasn't observing the usual distinctions that become so important to us. He seemed to accept and love people irrespective of their background and irrespective of their future potential.

So they did what all religious people do when confronted with something they didn't like. They murmur. But the truth is, of course, that Jesus doesn't feel comfortable with one kind of person or one class of person or with another.

The problem is that all those well-practiced distinctions that make the city go round are just irrelevant to him. Or more accurately, they are a hindrance to his true purposes.

[ 4 : 56 ] And all those things that we have so carefully crafted into our identity, our capacities and our cliques and our core competencies, Jesus sees straight through them and he sees the real you and the real me.

You see, the failure of the Pharisees is not a moral failure or a religious failure. It is a failure completely to understand what Jesus is there to do, his life and ministry.

And that is why this parable is so important. Because in this short story, Jesus takes us to the heart and reason for why he has come into the world, for why he dies on the cross, for why he rises again.

And I don't think in Luke's gospel there are any words so simple and so movingly describe his understanding of what he's doing. The parable has two parts.

And the first part in verses 4 and 5 speaks about the joy of rescue. Verse 4, Which of you, having a hundred sheep, if he's lost one of them, doesn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after one which is lost until he finds it?

[ 6 : 05 ] And when he's found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. Now it's a simple story of a search and rescue. But it is no ordinary rescue.

This is a sheep that's gone missing. And every person in Jesus' audience knows that when a sheep goes missing, that sheep is not going to find its way home by itself, like Mary's little lamb.

And unless the shepherd goes out and finds it quickly, that sheep will likely become dinner for any one of a number of hungry predators. And this immediately has a jarring note for Jesus' listeners.

They know the Old Testament. They know that God is the shepherd. They have sung the Lord is my shepherd more times than we ever will. But for them when they said the Lord is my shepherd, it was a source of pride.

Comes as a complete shock to them to think that Jesus thinks they may have gone astray, let alone be lost. What Jesus is doing is he is saying, all that you know of the God of the Old Testament is true of me.

[ 7 : 08 ] I have come from God, from heaven, into this world, to rescue men and women who are lost. The reason behind my miracles, the reason behind my teaching, the reason I'm speaking to you, he says, is because God is searching you to bring you back to himself.

See, God is not a detached observer watching from a distance. He doesn't wait to be asked to begin caring for us.

And the proof of that is in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. And you can tell how seriously God takes our lostness by the fact that he sends Jesus to live and die for us.

He must think we are in serious danger. We use this idea of lost in a whole host of different ways. I mean, it's possible to go to the art gallery and get lost in all the beauty, but that's not what Jesus means here.

It's possible to take a boat and sail up in the inside passage, but that's not what it means to be lost here either. I think many people think that life is the spiritual equivalent of Disney's film The Incredible Journey.

[ 8 : 15 ] You know, a group of domestic animals makes it all the way across the United States because of their superior homing instinct. No, no, Jesus seems to think that our lostness demands rescue.

And we're familiar, aren't we, with people being rescued here on the West Coast. And Canadian history and Australian history is littered of stories of explorers who set out on some bold initiative and were never heard of again.

They were lost. And in the last couple of weeks, we've heard this terrible story of the Russian submarine. And now this week we hear the grisly details that a number of the sailors lived for more than a day in the stricken sub at the bottom of the ocean.

They were lost because unless someone rescued them, they would perish. And this is what Jesus means here. And that is the point.

You see, that is what Jesus has come to do. He has come to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, to search for us and find us and bring us home to God. So when you look at the life and death of Jesus Christ, you see the love of God in action.

[ 9 : 23 ] I don't know if you've ever thought about this, what a remarkable thing it is that God should send his son into the world to seek for you and for me. That everything that Jesus went through was because we have cut ourselves off from God.

And it's not God who's lost. Jesus is like a shepherd, he says, searching, searching, searching, because he knows if he doesn't find the sheep, the sheep will perish.

And I'm not sure why you came to church this morning, but ultimately, spiritually, the reason is because God is diligently searching for you. The fact that you are here means that God is drawing you to himself.

The difficulty for us, I think, is like the Pharisees. We spend so much time pretending that we are not lost. It's so easy today to grow comfortable with our lostness.

Our food is fast and plentiful. Our homes are comfortable and expensive. We have gadgets to simplify our lives, medicine to prolong our days, and entertainment to dull any vestige of hunger and longing for God.

[10:32] But I think one of the marks of our lostness is the prevalence of spiritual drifting in our culture, particularly amongst our younger people. And if you read the books of Douglas Coupland, for example, he speaks for a generation who've grown up in a culture that has no use and no time for God, that moved between active consuming and compulsive television watching and apathy.

Life, he says, is lived between the demands of our advertising and our urges. And I think there are many people who feel this profound sense of disconnectedness from God.

We have no responsibilities, we have no commitments, and we have no purpose and no hope.

We're free to think not too hard about anything in particular to emulate the morality of Pulp Fiction and South Park, where death is funny and nothing is important.

In his book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Alan Bloom laments the fact that we are told we can be anything that we want to be, but we have no particular reason to be anything in particular.

And we drift from one peak experience to the next with the defensive anthem, I'm not hurting anybody. And we have a number of mechanisms that we've very cleverly developed to deal with our lostness.

[11:48] And one of the best ways for us is to draw a new map to configure reality around us so that we're at the centre and the map tells us, no, we're not in fact lost. One of the maps is spirituality, where I alleviate my sense of lostness by going through a series of spiritual exercises which are basically designed to make me feel better about myself.

Instead of acknowledging that I need to be lost and rescued by the shepherd, I devote myself to spiritual activities. And I think it is always more difficult for those who think that they are spiritual to come to terms with the fact that Jesus says we are lost.

Another current map is therapy. I'm not against therapy, it's a great gift. But it's not when it shifts the goal of human life and establishes me myself as the ultimate object of allegiance.

When that happens, my deep longing for God is replaced with a desire for emotional well-being. Sin becomes addiction. My longing for God becomes pathology.

And I become anaesthetised to those very things that I need to listen to. And I become a little lost sheep who is being retooled emotionally to deal with my anxieties. And I think that's why these words of Jesus are so important for us this morning.

[13:04] In Jesus' mind, we are all sheep. We have all erred and strayed from his ways like lost sheep. And we have put a distance between ourselves and God and we are lost.

And that is why, he says, he has come. And what does he do when he finds the sheep? You know, I'm told, in doing some background on this, that often when people find lost sheep, the sheep refuses to budge and clings to whatever it's stuck in.

Well, what does Jesus do when he finds us? Verse 5, he lays us on his shoulders rejoicing.

Shepherd has gone to great risk to find this wayward sheep.

This is how God loves us. See, God doesn't look at us and say, well, here's a self-help manual. Help yourself. He comes out and finds us where we are.

And when he finds us, that's not the end of it. He picks us up and puts us on his shoulders and takes us back home rejoicing. Rejoicing. And Jesus carries us on his shoulders the entire distance back to the fold.

[14:17] In other words, the measure of Jesus' burden is the exact measure of our lostness. He carries us back to God the distance that we have strayed.

His shoulders bear the burden of our guilt. All of it. And you know, if you read this gospel to its end, you'll discover what it did cost Jesus to bear that and to bear us.

We're told that as he was nailed to the cross, Jesus shouldered our sin and he shouldered our guilt. All that we've done to push God away, Jesus shouldered. It is by his death we're rescued. It's by his death we're forgiven. It's by his death we're brought home to God. And yet the most remarkable thing I think about these words is that he tells us that he does it for joy. And Jesus knew what it would cost him to rescue the lost sheep. But for him it's the opposite of being dull and tedious. It brings joy, rejoicing. Yes, he knows there's going to be the agony of the cross.

[15:16] But he knows that through that he gives delight to God and delight to him by saving us from being lost forever. And if I can just speak to those of you who are members of St. John's for a minute, visitors, you can close your ears to this.

I want to ask you, and that's an awful thing to say. Now everyone can listen to this, right? I want to ask everyone, does it bring you joy and delight when you see someone who is moving from being lost to being found?

And are there people who you know who are wandering, who haven't been in church for a few weeks or who are not following through on their spiritual commitments? If we're following Jesus, I want to encourage you, go and get them and bring them back.

Not because of the joy it's going to bring you, nor for the joy it will bring them, but for the joy that it will bring God. This is the point. There is joy in heaven because God delights in every single one of us.

He doesn't want to see any of us lost. God sent his son to rescue us and even though it cost him his life, Jesus loved to do the will of the Father. That's the joy of rescue.

[16:29] But secondly and briefly, we find there is a second part to this story and that is the joy of restoration. Look with me at verse 6 and 7. And when he comes home, the shepherd calls together his friends and neighbours and says, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.

Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance or 99 who think they need no repentance.

Here is the other side of being rescued. We have done nothing to force God's hand to search for us except basically to become lost. And God sends his son to search for us but when he finds us, he doesn't drag us back against our will.

To be brought back to God means to repent of our sin. It means to give up all our self-made maps. It means to surrender to Jesus Christ.

It means to acknowledge that despite my abilities and capacities and earnings, I am lost. That's what the Bible means by sin. Our problem is, you see, the only place we see sin is on dessert menus today.

[17:42] But in the Bible terms, sin is not a moral issue. It's a spiritual issue. It's not breaking a law. It's breaking the friendship and relationship with God. That all I've done in rebellion and all I've done in disobedience to God results in separation and distance from him.

That's what it means to be lost. And to repent isn't to eat humble pie and turn over a new leaf and find your way home. To repent means to change my heart and to change my mind and to recognise that I've put myself here by my own conceit and self-will.

And it's not despair and self-loathing. It's seeing that what I've done has separated me from God. But thank God, he's come and rescued me. It's allowing yourself to be rescued.

It's letting Jesus take you upon his shoulders and bring you back to God. And you know, it doesn't matter how far you've wandered. And it doesn't matter how deeply entangled you are in the thing that you're entangled in now.

If you want to turn away from it and allow Jesus to rescue you, he will bring you home. And when you do, and when he brings you there, it will bring great joy in heaven. We are in desperate need of rescue.

[18:51] Do you think that God would have sent his son to die on the cross if there was an easier way for him to do it? God cares for us so deeply that even when we turned our backs on him and wandered and kept wandering, he sent his son to rescue us and to shoulder us home.

And he invites us all to come back into friendship with him. You may be asking, what am I supposed to do? The answer is very simply to say, I am lost and I need to be rescued.

To put your hand out to Christ and say, please rescue me. It is as simple as that. To say, yes, I've pushed God away, I've wandered a long way off and I need to be forgiven and I need to be brought

home.

And all you need to do is to ask God to bring you back because of what Jesus has done. You may have been a church goer for many years. You may have never really allowed Jesus to rescue you. Now you realise that without him you are lost. I want to invite you to turn back to him in repentance, to ask him to forgive you and rescue you. Well, you may have realised almost for the first time how deeply precious you are to God.

[ 19 : 59 ] that God cares about you so much he gave the life of his own son for you. But you know you're lost, that's not your problem. But you find it hard to believe that he has sought you and found you.

If you reach your hand out to him, he will rescue you. And I want to pray a prayer and if you would like to reach your hand out to God and have him do that, why don't you echo this prayer in your own heart to God as I pray it.

Let's bow our heads. Heavenly Father, I have disobeyed you and gone my own way.

I have wandered from you and I am lost. I repent and turn away from all that I have done in rebellion to you.

thank you for loving me and sending Jesus to search for me. Thank you that you died to bring me back to you.

[ 21 : 05 ] Please forgive me and take me back and be my God. Amen. This mp3 sermon along with many others is available from the St. John's Chaunesey website at [www.stjohnschaunesey.org](http://www.stjohnschaunesey.org) That address is [www.stjohns.org](http://www.stjohns.org) On the website, you will also find information about ministries, worship services, and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy.

We hope that this sermon on the web has helped you, and that you will share it with others. Thank you.