

[Texting Question: **Where is God?**]

[Answers to texting question] Asking "Where is God" might sound like a strange question, especially since we're all sitting in a Church building right now. The immediate answer is, God is up in Heaven, looking down on all of us. Others might take a more holistic approach, say something like, God is everywhere, God is with everyone. And the most spiritual among us may say, God is here, with us, in our worship.

[**bring up the map with a church building and God over the building**] That's probably the response most of us get. This is a church building, and God is in Church, with Church people. The people here are God's flock, God's people, and God is like most of us - he likes to be with his people.

Of course, that's true. We believe that when we worship, it's because God has gathered us together and is living and working among us in a unique way.

But we could also say that God is not here. God is not in the Church building, among the people gathered here. We could also claim that God is out and about in the world, seeking those who are not here, inviting them into the life he desires for them. The life God created them for.

[**Map: God out there, with Them**] This is a thought experiment. God is Spirit, not a body like we are. So God can be here and there at the same time (in fact, in theological circles we talk about God as omnipresent, which means God is all places at once). So it's actually a bit silly to argue about where God is.

Except it's not. Because when we say the very true thing: "God is here, with us", if we're not careful, that truth can become distorted into a toxic belief: that God is *only* in here with us. That God therefore somehow loves us better, that we've in some way *earned* our spot in here.

And by contrast, those who *aren't* in here, well. There must be something wrong with them. They must be *lesser* in some way. If we in here are God's people, that must mean that They are... not God's people. Not chosen. Not worthy in some essential way.

Of course we don't ever *say* that (at least most of us don't), but it comes out in how we treat people. How Christians are perceived in the world - as elitist, judgmental, holier-than-thou.

[**Scripture Slide**] And we're not the first people to have that problem. When God came among us in the person of Jesus, he encountered the same mentality. Let's look at how Jesus engaged that thinking. If you have a bible, or if you can get it on your phone, turn with me to Luke 15. If you grabbed one of our Bibles on the way in, you can find Luke 15 on page XXX. And if you don't own a Bible, please keep that one as a gift from us.

As you're finding Luke 15: A certain segment of people in Jesus' day had worked really hard to stay faithful to God. Despite all the hardships in their lives - both personal and at a national level, they had continued to keep God's covenant, continued to worship and live lives God approved of.

Not everyone had. And so, we can see from how Jesus interacted with these people, that the religious folks, the church people, looked down on everyone else. Look at the beginning of chapter 15, the first couple of verses:

The tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable: -- Luke 15:1-3

Jesus tells a story about a shepherd searching for a lost sheep. It's a story that frankly doesn't make a lot of sense in our context - not too many shepherds among us. We didn't grow up with sheep and shepherds as a vital part of our economy, an everyday example that anyone listening would connect to on an emotional, visceral level.

We're not in a world of sheep and shepherds, so it's easy to miss what Jesus is telling all those religious folk. And of course, that's why we're here, that's what a sermon is all about. I sit here and unpack the cultural context, help you understand how that original audience would've heard it.

But by the time I'm done, you get it, but you don't *get it*. It's like having to explain the joke - by the time you're finished, it's not funny anymore. You miss the *emotional* hook of the story. And that's the whole point of stories. That's why stories are different from lectures.

So in this series, which we're calling *You Had to Be There*, we're taking a different approach. We're borrowing from a book called *The First Time We Saw Him*, by a good friend of mine named Matt Mikalatos. Matt asks, What would Jesus' stories sound like if he had come to us *today*, instead of Israel 2,000 years ago? Matt reimagines many of Jesus' most famous stories, to help us connect better. So sit back and listen to the story of the Lost Sheep, only it's not about a sheep anymore.

Imagine you're sitting at a table, eating with Jesus. He's this religious teacher, maybe a new preacher in town, and you've heard he's pretty great, pretty strange, unlike any preacher you've ever encountered before. And sure enough, he's partying with you. Eating and drinking and just enjoying life.

Then some church folk pop their heads in, and mutter - not really to themselves; definitely loudly enough to be heard - Can you believe this so-called "preacher"? Look at him partying and carrying on with all these *sinners*.

This preacher catches their eye, looks at you and says, Let me tell you a story: [Maybe a picture of a school bus or a zoo?]

Andy was a second-grade teacher in downtown Los Angeles. The poverty of Andy's students made a knot in his stomach, and he thought of them almost as his own children, although he didn't have any, which was okay, because some of them didn't have a father. Andy worked hard to give those kids some fond, Technicolor memories, so that as adults they could think back on their childhood without nightmares.

One year he hatched a plan for a field trip to the San Diego Zoo, complete with pictures in front of the giraffes and taking home stuffed tigers and ice cream cones melting all over seven-year-old fingers. The school didn't have the money budgeted, of course, and the children didn't have any, and Andy certainly didn't, but he made phone calls and begged administrators and wrote politicians and cajoled zoo employees until he scraped together enough promises and permissions to fill a long yellow bus full of volunteers and second graders—not just his own class but every second grader in the school—and ride down to the best zoo in the world.

He put them on the buddy system and assigned them to clusters of ten with an adult in each and he marched them proudly through the parking lot and past the ticket booths and then off to the polar bears. The kids laughed and one kid said, “What about the penguins?” And Andy said, “Not yet. Stick together, and grab your buddy. Stay with your partners.” He counted the kids often: . . . 96, 97, 98, 99, 100. He kept them from climbing on fences, snagged wanderers, and picked up little Selina when she turned her ankle and couldn’t keep up. He counted to a hundred at the giraffe enclosure, at the monkey environment, at the sea lion tank. He counted to a hundred more times in one day than his students had all year and he smiled at the thought.

At lunch he counted again: . . . 96, 97, 98, 99—no number 100! Maybe one of the kids had switched tables. He counted again: . . . 97, 98, 99. His heart beat faster, his teeth clenched, and he pointed at each of them now as he counted: . . . 97, 98, 99. He put out the zero call to the kids, the sign for them to take their volume down to nothing and sit quietly, and when the children were sitting still with their half-eaten sandwiches and cracker bags in front of them, he counted one more time.

Roger Hom was missing.

Roger. A good, well-behaved, but curious kid. Andy wasn’t surprised he had wandered, just surprised he had gotten away. So what did Andy do? A mathematician might shrug his shoulders and say, “Aw, what’s one kid more or less?” He still had 99 percent of his students. He could write off that 1 percent. No! Of course not, not Andy. He arranged the parents in a perimeter around the kids and he drew an imaginary circle around them and said, “Listen, if these kids cross this line, tell them to get back over it, because this is public school and that’s all we have the authority to do.” He raced back through the zoo, past the lions and giraffes and monkeys, grabbing every person he saw and shouting, “Have you seen this kid, seven years old, about this high, answers to Roger?”

He told the zoo staff and the concession workers and the passersby and he scoured every square inch of that zoo until finally he found Roger, safe and sound, looking placidly at the penguins. Andy scooped him up into his arms and squeezed him so hard that Roger looked at him with a warm and happy confusion. Andy put Roger on his shoulders and marched back to the rest of the class. When he came into view of the wall of parents, they let out a ragged cheer.

[Jesus] clears his throat and takes a small sip from his water bottle and says, “In the same way, there is more cheering in heaven about one lost child coming home than for the ninety-nine who stayed in the right place.”

**"There is more cheering in heaven about one lost child coming home than for the ninety-nine who stayed in the right place. -- Jesus"**

Can you imagine how that would've struck the room? That room full of reveling sinners, judgmental church people, and one unusual preacher telling a radical story.

A story about a God who's not in the church with the Church people (or in the synagogue with the synagogue people). God is not a teacher who stays with 99 safe children and figures 99% is okay (that's an A+, after all), that the one lost kid is an acceptable loss, some collateral damage you run the risk of incurring when you plan a field trip.

No. When one child goes missing, God *leaves* the 99 safe and seeks the one lost child.

That cuts against our tendency to divide people up. To separate the world into God's people and not God's people. Church people and worldly people. Saints and sinners.

According to Jesus, we're *all* part of God's flock. We're *all* students in God's class. We're *all* God's children. And God doesn't want to lose a single one of us.

Every life is precious to God. Every person matters to God. And when you've been found by God, when God has brought you back into the fold, back into the class, God returns to seek others who're lost, who've been separated from the life God created them to have.

Revolutionary, isn't it? To say that God is *for* you. No matter what you've done, you're still a child of God. No matter what your past, what's been done to you, God is searching for you.

That's what's good about the news Jesus brings: there's no such thing as "insiders" and "outsiders" in God's eyes. No one who's "good enough" or "not good enough". Everyone is a child of God. God is out there, seeking everyone.

Everyone. No exceptions.

My first pastoral job was in a town called Columbia, MO - home of the Mizzou Tigers (they're one of those teams the Longhorns hook every couple of years). Shortly after I left Columbia, a group of young black men beat up a middle-aged white man in a parking garage. They stole his wallet and ran off, but not before the security cameras caught the image of a kid named Charlie.

Charlie was arrested and convicted, sent to jail. I remember reading the news report online, and seeing the hateful, harsh comments - talking about how he and kids like him were ruining the town, how they were just a bunch of thugs (which is the new word white people like to use instead of the n-word). I read people saying he should be locked up forever and the key thrown away.

I read a lot of things - you can probably imagine how hateful many of them were.

I was deeply bothered, because I'd met Charlie before. I served as the youth pastor at a church in Columbia, and one day, our church received a call from a single mom. She had just escaped an abusive relationship and gotten into her own place. She had four kids and nothing else - they had literally escaped with the clothes on their backs.

Our church gathered some food and furniture - a couple of beds, a couch, a crib for the baby. I and another pastor went to deliver the donations to the Section 8 apartment they had just moved into. We stood in the kitchen, talking with the mom, and I noticed her two older kids - teen boys, lurking in the next room, casting furtive glances into the kitchen where we stood. I introduced myself to them and invited them to come to our mid-week youth gathering, which was that night.

They said nothing, but their mom insisted they would come if they could get a ride. Without a moment's hesitation, I volunteered to return in a few hours to pick up Chris and his older brother, Charlie.

I brought one of my students with me (he was the same age, and very good at welcoming new people). We picked Charlie and Chris up. We drove them to the church building, attempting to get to know them. They offered only sullen, one-word answers.

That night, during the gathering, they stood in the back. They didn't sing. They didn't participate in the teaching or discussion. Finally, the night was over and I drove them home, feeling defeated.

About halfway back to their apartment, Charlie spoke up: "I'm sorry we didn't sing tonight."

I was at a loss for words. I didn't care if they sang or not. I just wanted them to feel welcomed and connected. I said, Don't worry, it's okay! as encouragingly as I could.

But Charlie wasn't finished. He continued, "We would have sang. But we didn't know any of the words."

He paused as if unsure whether he should go on, and then, in a barely-audible voice full of fear, the voice of a kid who's gotten used to being rejected but still can't quite quit hoping, Charlie said, "We had a really good time tonight."

I was stunned. They *enjoyed* themselves? That quiet, that sullen indifference, that was a *defense*? When we got back to their house, I stopped them and promised that I or someone would be there every week to pick them up if they wanted to come back.

And we did. For the next six months or so. Charlie and Chris became part of our group. They both came out of their shells, blossomed into fun, funny, smart and sweet kids. And for that brief time, there wasn't a kinder, more gentle or considerate kid in my whole group than Charlie.

And then his mom moved again. No forwarding address. No phone number.

We lost Charlie.

And by the time I found him again, I was living in Ohio and he was sitting in a jail cell. Being called a degenerate. A thug. A danger to society.

I don't know what happened to Charlie between the time he left our little group and the day he decided to mug that guy in the parking lot. I can make some good guesses.

But what I do know is that Charlie is not a thug. A degenerate. A danger to society.

He certainly committed a crime. But before he did that, Charlie was a lost child, desperate to belong. He was in a crappy family situation, a crappy neighborhood and as a sixteen-year-old kid, he didn't have a lot of options.

The news of Charlie's arrest broke me. I've spent the last five years often returning to my time with him, wondering if there was something more I could've done.

But here is where I take comfort: Charlie is first and foremost a child of God. A lost sheep, but a part of God's flock none-the-less. Nothing Charlie does can ever separate him from God's love. Nothing he has done. Nothing he will ever do.

God is a good shepherd, a loving parent, and God dwells with Charlie even now, as he sits in prison. God continues to work in his life, to call him back home.

Is that how you see those who're different from you, those who are *clearly* outside the Church? Are they sinners, thugs, degenerates? Or are they lost children? Are they riff-raff, hooligans, outlaws or are they brothers and sisters?

We have heard Jesus' answer. And more than that, we've Jesus has revealed to us where God is: God is not here, among us, safe in the fold. God is out there, among the sinners and thugs and outlaws, calling them back to where they belong.

Remember that Jesus told this story in the middle of a party. A party full of sinners. And where was he? Jesus was *at the party*. And when the church folk criticized him, said, What sort of preacher would be partying with sinners, Jesus said, You don't know God very well. Because God has come among you to seek and save those who are lost. I'm here to rescue those who need rescue.

We're going to talk next week about what this story means for those of us who are here, who consider ourselves church people, those who've already been rescued.

But for today, can we simply celebrate the fact that our God is the God who parties with sinners, the God who isn't willing for anyone to die, but is working so that everyone, every single lost child in this world, might have life?

Let's celebrate that God is *for* us. Unequivocally. No question, no debate. God is for you.

Where is God? God is with you. Seeking you, calling you home. Right now. No matter who you are. No matter what you've done.

God is relentless. God will not rest until all his children are safe. That includes me. And that includes you.

Today, know that you are sought after by God. Know that you are loved by God. Beyond question, beyond compare. End of story.

That's good news. No matter who you are.

### **Examine**

I want to close today with a prayer exercise called an Examine. This is an exercise you can use on your own, throughout the week as well. I'll ask some questions and give you a few minutes for silent, prayer reflection. And then I'll close us with a prayer.

When in the last week have you felt close to God?

When in the last week have you felt far from God?

When in the next week will feel far from God?

How can you be a picture of God's relentless love this week?