

**Columbia, Missouri**  
**The Worship of God • January 30, 2022**



**The Scripture**  
**Luke 15:1-10**

*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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘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 ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

**The Message**  
**“What Is STRONG with Me? – Value”**  
**Mark Briley**

If you’ve followed Christian music for a few decades covering the ’80s and ’90s especially, you’ll know the name Michael W. Smith<sup>1</sup>. Gotta have the “W” in there. He

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<sup>1</sup> <https://michaelwsmith.com/>

was known for churchy, praise songs and most notably the song, “*Friends*,” that was sung by most senior classes around the country at church on Senior Sunday for a good dozen years or so. “*Packing up the dreams God planted...*”

One of his other well-known songs popped up on a Twitter feed recently. A Christian comedian and actor shared it<sup>2</sup> following a serious comment in the realm of politics as Joe Biden said, “*Vladimir Putin was looking for his place in the world.*” Upon hearing that, the comedian said, “*All I could think of was Putin gazing out the window of his palace, single tear running down his cheek while Michael W. Smith blares from his stereo.*” The blaring song of course: “*My Place in this World.*” “*Looking for a reason, roaming through the night to find my place in this world... my place in this world.*”



While this comedian was making light of what we know to be a very serious situation on the world stage right now, I know we’ve all needed some moments of levity amidst a very difficult season we’re living through, and I admit to a little chuckle when I read it. I actually remember that Michael W. song from my

childhood – seeing it on a video our church used in our alternative worship service thinking about our place, searching for meaning and purpose.

I’ve had many conversations in recent weeks with friends and colleagues across the country and church members close to home and even strangers who are in that single tear situation themselves – looking at the mess of the world and singing, “*Not a lot to lean on, I need your light to help me find my place in this world, my place in this world.*”

I sat with Disciples pastors from around the country a couple of days this week at a conference. Adam Hamilton<sup>3</sup>, who pastor’s the largest United Methodist Church in the country, was our keynoter. Powerful insights about leading through and beyond this pandemic, building teams, dreaming of the church next, etc. It was powerful. The pastor with the opportunity to introduce Hamilton to our group was also a personal friend of Adam’s given the proximity of them serving the same city for many years. The introduction was full of all the accolades and resume impressive stuff – 23,000-member congregation, six campuses, 147,298 books (*which was exaggerated a bit, but the other stuff wasn’t*).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.evankoons.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.adamhamilton.com/> Hamilton is senior pastor of The United Methodist Church of the Resurrection based in Leawood, Kansas. [www.cor.org](http://www.cor.org)

But after all that, our colleague introducing him said, *“None of that is what I want to say about Adam. What I want you to know, is that a few years ago, I was having a hard, hard time in ministry, and I was ready to throw in the towel. Not just daydreaming. Not just, maybe I’ll go this much longer. No. I’m done. I left a church meeting late that night and texted Adam that I was done and just wanted him to know. Adam texted right back, “Where are you? I’ll meet you at such and such place in 20 minutes.” This pastor texted back, “No, no, Adam. I wasn’t needing you to do anything, I just wanted you to know so that when the news comes out, you had heard it from me.” “Nope. 20 minutes. Meet me there.” So, there they gathered, and the first thing Adam said as they sat down was, “You’re my friend, and I love you.” This pastor doing this introduction said, “This guy – all the people, all the accolades, and here he sits in front of me and says, ‘You’re my friend. I love you.’” My colleague said, “I don’t remember a single other thing Adam said to me that night. But that was enough. That was enough.”*

Do you know what it feels like to feel valued like that? We all know what it feels like to be **devalued**. We’ve had more than a few experiences of someone telling us the opposite and made us to feel worthless. You felt lost. Tear drops. *“Looking for a reason, roaming through the night to find your place in this world.”*

I had gone down the Michael W. Smith rabbit hole far enough at this point that I had to see the other lyrics from that song. Verse two hit me – in this very spirit we’re talking about today: *“If there are millions down on their knees; among the many can you still hear me? Hear me asking where do I belong? Is there a vision that I can call my own? Show me.”*

Show me. And boom... right there, Jesus, in our Lukan passage today says, *“Yes. You are valued. That is what is strong with you. Your value.”* Maybe you need to be reminded of that today as we wrap up our New Year sermon series, *“What is strong with me?”*

You heard the story read again. The intro parables to the bigger one of the Prodigal Son. All with the same message: You matter to God. The value of your life is far beyond any *“dog water”* nonsense anyone else tries to tell you. *“That’s dog water!”* my son likes to say. *“You don’t matter to God?”* Say it with me, *“That’s dog water.”* It is.

And Jesus makes it as clear as he possibly can. Jesus is teaching and the masses are amassing. He’s on fire. *Boom!* Illustration that floors the locals. *Boom!* Parable that challenges the socially elite. *Boom!* Exegetical mastery that baffles even the most studied theologians. This walk in Luke’s gospel is teaching upon teaching upon lesson upon lesson. And into this we get Luke 15 – maybe the most famous chapter of Luke’s gospel given the Prodigal Son story – one that people who never step foot in church

have at least heard of the title. So here is Jesus – he’s riffin’ and spoutin,’ and the growing crowd is full of more and more people who weren’t part of the unofficially assigned pew sitters in worship.

“*Get off my pew!*” The Pharisees and scribes were a little fed up with Jesus and his following. They scoffed at his teaching and the people he was drawing – the sinners and tax collectors as it were. The religious folks were uncomfortable with the inclusion of the non-religious – and worse than non-religious was their perceived value to society. The Pharisees had failed-to-see them as people with any value at all. They watched the wrong news station. They used the wrong language. They didn’t know the rituals. They did all the things like the same people you and I judge too when we’re not at our best. Jesus senses their disgust and so he winds up with another parable – the double shot we get in the first ten verses of chapter fifteen.

“*Let me clear my throat,*” he begins (*unnnhhh*). “*What farmer loses track of a single sheep and doesn’t leave the safe and secured herd to go after it?*” “*What woman loses a bill from her ATM withdrawal and doesn’t turn over every nook and cranny of her purse and floor mat until she finds it?*”

The tax collectors and sinners – again just consider this crowd the people that you judge more harshly than anyone else – are just soaking in what Jesus is saying as he casts an eye over the tops of their heads to the Pharisees – the educated church folk – who are scowling as they lean against the pillar in the back of the room pretending to not care what Jesus is saying. Jesus goes on, “*The shepherd and woman not only search and search to find what was lost but when found, they make a big batch of queso and guac and invite the whole neighborhood over to celebrate.*”

Notice what Jesus isn’t concerned about in these stories. He’s not concerned with how or why the sheep came to be lost, for example. Whether the sheep wandered off unintentionally, got a wild hair and hit up the sheep bars or was taken by sheep-stealers, Jesus displays not one bit of curiosity. The singular concern was to be reunited with what was lost and celebrate with a full spirit. The Pharisees aren’t interested. It may be more that they don’t have time to mess with the newbies or the ones who keep straying or are just done with them entirely.

And you may be in this role right now. Trying to hold things together and frustrated with people who have seemingly checked out. We naturally feel this sometimes when we’re exhausted ourselves, and we look around with so much work to do and say, “*No help!*” with such frustration. But we don’t always know why people are struggling or straying. When I learned that a person’s behavior often has more to do with their internal struggle than it had anything to do with me, I learned grace on a whole new level.

The Pharisees were worried about the budgets and the mission statements and the dissertations they're writing about what really matters to God. And Jesus says, "*Nope. These lost are so valuable to God, we're staying after them, we're making space for them, we're giving up some of our own comfort so they can find a way home too.*"

Jesus is saying your value is what is strong with you. And it may be the thing we question the most. Most of us are our own worst critic. We're hard, hard, hard on ourselves. And in this weird COVID season, now entering year three, is having a major toll on our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. There's not just one sheep separated from the herd – there are sheep flying around every which way, and God pulls one close, and another slips out the back door. We're questing as a people right now.

You want to relate to a writer these days? Check out the book of Ecclesiastes. The writer is known as The Questor. We're roaming through the night. We're wondering about God, faith, and church. Whether out loud or painstakingly shouting it inside our own being, we're asking, "*Do I have any value? Do I add any value to my family? To my job? To my team? To my friends?*"

And it is painful. Most of us, if not right now, at some point have needed or will need yet in this season someone to say, "*I'll meet you in 20 minutes,*" look us in the eye and say, "*You're my friend, and I love you.*" If you've made it as far as this sanctuary today or even have one eye on us via screen at home today, hear this clearly: "*You matter to God. You matter to us.*"

And there's something more I think God wants us to know. It's not just a desire for you to know God values you. God wants you to value yourself, too. When we're lost it's good to be sought after. But the next step is to turn our found-ness into fondness. Learn to love what is strong with you. It's hard to love ourselves; I know. That is often the subtle part of the Great Commandment that we tend to overlook. That second part about "*loving our neighbor as we love **ourselves**.*" We've got to work at loving ourselves, too. Loving ourselves well – honoring the dignity of God's creation in us, taking care of ourselves, strengthening our own gifts makes everyone better.

Jim Kwik said, "*There is a version of yourself you haven't met yet. Keep showing up until you're introduced.*" It's not a forever game of hide and seek with God. If we're lost, if we've strayed... then we're being sought, yes, but when found – come out with your hands open to praise God and find a way to join the search party for the others missing that God is looking for too. Start with some self-discipline. Some new habits.

Pray five times a day... they don't have to be elaborate, simply an intentional reminder that you've been found and you're going to embrace that gift today by giving your best.

*"God, thank you for finding me and valuing me. I'm yours now, yours today, ready to grow and serve. Amen."*

*God, my value is strong. Help me see the value in others today. Amen."*

*"God, I'm back. I'm singing again. I'm ready to share the song. Amen."*

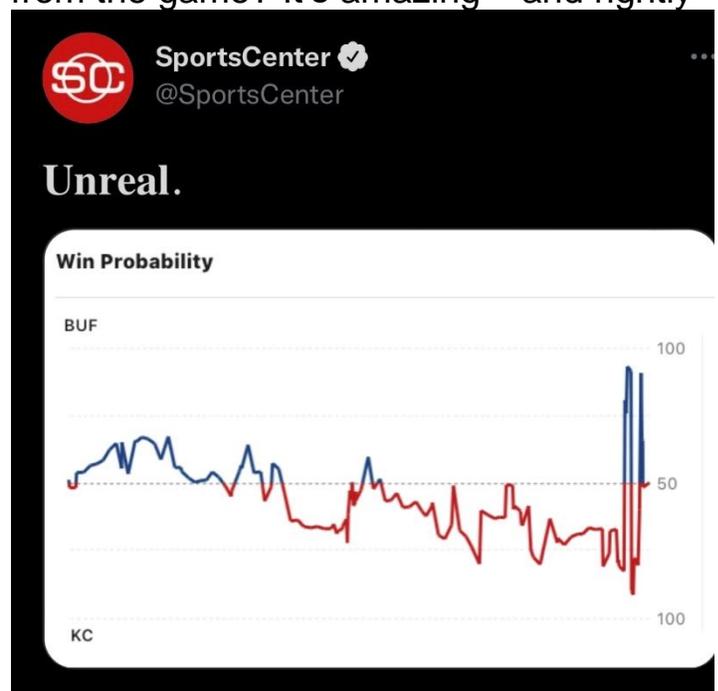
*"God, I'm looking for a reason, roaming through the night to find my place in this world. Show me. Show me. Amen."*

And what happens? You start seeing the value of your life and that of others. You start seeing opportunities to add value too.

Chiefs had a little game against the Buffalo Bills last Sunday night. You probably didn't hear about it. Both teams have 3,600 seconds in the game to win. If you've lost all but 13 of those seconds, who would really chase after a win in such a short amount of time. Who leaves the 3,587 seconds in search of the 13? I was surprised to learn that the Chief's, losing by three points with those 13 seconds left still had a winning probability of 9%. That's not much, but more of a chance than I would have guessed.

Have you seen the winning probability chart from the game? It's amazing – and rightly looks like a heart attack. With those same 13 seconds left, my aunt turned off the game and went to bed. Her beloved Chiefs had lost. Boy, was she surprised in the morning. I ran a few circles around my house, I'm not gonna lie. Tremendous game but that's not the point.

While many may have chosen to rub in this loss to distraught Buffalo fans, a Chief's Meme Face Book group saw the opportunity to add value instead. Pulling the miracle number of 13, the group asked Chiefs fans to contribute \$13 to Bill's quarterback, Josh Allen's, foundation at the Children's Hospital in Buffalo named in honor of his grandmother, who died of cancer last year. Actually, Bills fans started this practice last season after they



defeated the Baltimore Ravens, donating similar gifts to Lamar Jackson's charity. More than \$300,000 has already been donated to the Buffalo hospital by Chief's fans. We can scoff about the how's and whys of it all or we can be inspired to add value to things that matter. Can you live with this spirit? We can live with a mentality that being so valued by God means we can add value to others and strengthen our neighbors in the process.

I love what Donald Miller said recently. It was simply, *"Right before you die, you'll realize your whole life was about loving people. And you watched too much television."*

Do you think that's true? Watching too much television, yes. But the other part. That your whole life is about loving people? Remembering to love yourself is a critical part of this whole reality. Your value is to be strong with you. In this famous word from Luke, Jesus wants you to never forget it. God loves you. God seeks you. And when God finds you and you know you've been found, God celebrates. If you've forgotten these days, even a little bit, that you are valued beyond measure, remember it today. Remember it now.

Pastors forget this sometimes, too. I'm sitting in a large ballroom with 50 other pastors this week – we're spread out and masked given Omicron and all. My friend and colleague offers this beautiful and extraordinary word that allowed us all to just be valued as children of God... not as pastors trying to hold it all together. And we were just floored and admittedly a little misty eyed. The Spirit was palpable. And one of our colleagues spontaneously rose from her seat and broke the silence with what I can only describe as the voice of an angel. She sang, *"Jesus loves me this I know. For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong."*

Sing with me would you, *"Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes. Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so."* And we sang it again and the voices of these tired pastors, wondering what value they still have to offer, strengthened in confidence, *"Yes Jesus loves me!"* sing it with me, *"Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so."*

And in that moment, I knew it was true again. I knew it was true. I pray you know it is true, too.

**Song of Focus**  
***"You Are Loved"***  
**Words and Music: Ed Varnum**

1. You are a child of God, a special life, just lift your eyes and see,  
with gifts to share and with such joy to know, alive and free to be.

Whatever this life may send your way, above all, please know this:  
no matter what may happen, you are loved.

If there is fear of tomorrow, if there is pain or some loss,  
There's a joy that's greater than sorrow, there is new life after the cross!

2. You are a child of God, a special life, there's so much you can do,  
an endless universe of possibilities, and it can still come true.  
Whatever this life may send your way, above all, please know this:  
no matter what may happen, you are loved.

This life has pathways to choose, choices we don't like to make,  
but we gain some things as we lose, things to see with each step we take.

3. You are a child of God, the stage is yours, it's time for you to sing.  
Just hear that orchestra! You're not alone: the choir is in the wings.  
Whatever this life may send your way, above all, please know this:  
no matter what may happen, you are loved.

Just one thing to remember: you are loved.

**BROAD HEARTS   BROAD MINDS   BROAD REACH**