

“Lost and Found”
Luke 15: 1-10
September 2, 2007

For better or worse there is one name that has been on the tongues and in the ears of pretty much every person that I have seen or heard on TV or talk radio in the past week. That name is →Michael Vick. Even through he has gained his fame as an athlete, it seems that pretty much everybody, sports fan or not has an opinion on the man, his character, and his just desserts.

During his 7 years as the star quarterback of the Atlanta Falcons, Vick has earned the respect and admiration of the entire sporting world. Possessing a quickness and agility rarely seen in a quarterback, Vick redefined the position and brought a new dimension to the game of football.

His face was everywhere, newspapers, magazines and even video games featured →his smiling face and trademark #7 jersey. As my buddy Max always says about an individual who has earned such distinction, “*The chicks dig him and the guys want to be like him.*” Michael Vick was the hottest thing around. That was at least until Tuesday, July 17. →That was the day that Vick was indicted on federal charges of animal cruelty for the role that he played in bankrolling and participating in a dog fighting operation that was based in a house that he owned in Virginia.

Today things are very different for Michael Vick. Following his arrest and indictment, and culminating with →the guilty plea that he entered in Federal court Monday, the tide of personal and public opinion concerning Michael Vick has turned faster than he could take the corner around the end on a quarterback keeper.

→His team and the NFL have suspended him. →Nike dropped his multi-million dollar endorsement deal. →His one time partners in the dog fighting ring have turned their backs and offered testimony against him. And even following what appeared to be a sincere and heart felt acceptance of responsibility and plea for forgiveness from any and anyone that he may have hurt or disappointed, it seems that →no one, save his very closest friends and family want anything to do with Michael Vick.

And while I am as troubled by the heinous and brutal allegations against him, as I watched Michael Vick's saga unfold over this past week, I couldn't help but think about this morning's scripture lesson, and ask that now familiar question, → "*What would Jesus do?*"

Well, let's ask him, shall we? For Jesus has shared his opinion on the subject. In these two stories that we just read from Luke's gospel we find Jesus' response to a situation not so different from the one that is faced by Michael Vick this morning. In these stories commonly known as → the parable of the lost sheep and lost coin, Jesus was responding to the religious leaders of the day who were murmuring behind his back about the shocking and shameful reality that "*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*" Luke 15: 2.

As I'm sure you know, Jesus wasn't much of one to hang out with the beautiful and powerful people of his day. More than once he was called to task by the rich and powerful concerning his tendency to hang out with the seedier elements of society, the people that he referred to as "*the least of these,*" as in → "*As you do it unto the least of these, you do it unto me.*" You see, in word and action, Jesus was teaching the world around him about the love and grace of his Heavenly Father. And so, these parables have a lot to teach us about our relationship with God and our neighbor.

Concerning our relationship with God, Jesus' parables remind us of the important truth that → God never gives up on his children. In the case of Michael Vick, all of these people, most of them never having met him and knowing very little about him, have already declared ultimate judgment on his life and his soul.

→ They have given up on him as an athlete, many saying that he won't or shouldn't ever play again in the NFL. And → they have given up on him as a human being as nearly everyone, including any number of folks who were standing by his side whenever whatever did or did not happen with those dogs in Virginia was taking place. As best I can tell, it seems that → the whole world, all those adoring masses who cheered his every move, begged him for interviews, and lined up for his autograph just a few months ago, it seems that the whole world has given up on Michael Vick.

But thankfully, for Michael Vick and you and me as well, → God doesn't work this way. Just try to imagine the feeling of separation, rejection and personal loss that Vick must be experiencing this morning. Feelings not so unlike ones that you and I have likely felt to a greater or lesser degree in our own lives. → Have you ever done something so wrong, have you ever been so disappointed in yourself, have you ever felt so rejected that you couldn't possibly imagine that God could love and forgive you?

I don't doubt that this is pretty much the way that Michael Vick is feeling right about now. But the good news for him, and for you and me as well, is that just as the shepherd in Jesus' parable went searching for his lost sheep trusting the other 99 sheep to stay on the straight and narrow, and just as that woman was willing to spend so much time and energy searching out that one lost coin, → there is a wideness to God's love that enables him to not just wait for, but to go looking after his lost sheep, and to rejoice like mad when one of them come home.

The problem for us is that → this sort of unbounded love defies human understanding. And that's why Jesus' 2 stories speak to our relationship with our neighbor. For → not only do we sometimes have trouble believing that God could love us, but even moreso, there are times and circumstances in life when we don't want to believe that God could love and accept certain other people. People like Michael Vick, and the sinners and tax collectors in Jesus day.

→ For all of us there are certain people, certain actions, and certain circumstances that we choose to define as being outside of God's grace. At these times and places we are so quick to serve as judge and jury, defining sin, assigning blame, and delivering our opinion concerning an appropriate judgment.

Why do we do this? We do this for the same reason that the Pharisees distanced themselves from the tax collectors and sinners in Jesus' day.

→ We do it to make ourselves look good. Like the man who stood in the town square in ----- declaring "*Thank God that I am not like this man, a poor sinner.*"

The predominant reason that so many folks today are so quick to proclaim Michael Vick's guilt, and deny the sincerity of his remorse, people who have never met the man and have no idea of the true thoughts and feelings in his heart and head, the reason that they are so ready to condemn him is so that they can stand back and say, → "*I might not be perfect, but at least I'm not a dog killer.*" We hope to hide our guilt and look better by comparison.

But the truth of the matter is that → God's grace is wide enough for you, me, and Michael Vick as well. And → God's love never gives up on any one of us. → God always believes in the best we can possibly be and do. And Jesus parable, as well as his love for the tax collectors and sinners of his day reminds us all that we would be wise to believe the same for ourselves, as well as those that we are tempted to place beyond God's mercy.

As one of my seminary professors was fond of saying, "*We all stand on level ground in the shadow of the cross.*" Thank God for the gift of grace that will never give up playing hide and seek with that part of every single one of us that stands in the need of redemption. Don't condemn Michael Vick, pray for him, pray for me, pray for yourself remembering Jesus words, "*There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*" Luke 15:10
Amen.