In the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells parables in which a woman and a man practice selective attention in the search for a lost coin and a lost sheep. Using different models, the *spotlight model* and the *zoom-lens model,* they filter out the less important things while concentrating on the more important things. In the Spotlight model, visual attention is focused like a beacon that enables us to see things clearly within small, well-defined area. Imagine that you are staring intently at someone. You see them clearly; but around them, on the fringe, things are still visible, just not as clear, like the background scenery in our peripheral vision. Beyond the fringe is the margin, where very little is seen. This is like the sun or the moon in the sky overhead which are too far distant to be relevant in that moment.

The woman with the lost coin uses the spotlight model. She has 10 silver coins and when she loses one of them, she lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until she finds it. She shines her spotlight into every dark corner of the house, ignoring things that are in the fringe and the margin until the beam of the light reflects her coin. Then she calls her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost” (Luke 15:9).

In the zoom-lens model, visual attention is more like the zoom-lens of a camera. We can increase or decrease the size of our focus. We can zoom in close to concentrate on an item of interest, but we might lose sight of those things that are outside of our focus area. If we go the other direction and zoom out, we can see a larger area, but we run the risk of losing focus on small, individual items and details.

The man with the lost sheep uses the zoom-lens model. Most days, he zooms out so that he can keep an eye on his 100 sheep, but when one sheep becomes lost, he zooms in on that one sheep until he finds it. “When he has found it,” says Jesus, “he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices” (v. 5). Notice, however, that as the man zooms in on the lost sheep, he loses sight of the 99 sheep outside the focus area. We might imagine that when he throws a party for his friends, rejoicing in the return of the one, lost sheep, some of them might ask, “Why didn’t you keep your focus on the 99?”

Good question! Watching over 99 sheep seems to be much more sensible than zooming in on one. But this is not the approach of Jesus, who wants his followers to practice selective attention. “I tell you,” says Jesus, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (v. 7).

One coin. One sheep. One sinner. Put the spotlight on the one coin, says Jesus, not the nine. Zoom in on the one sheep, not the 99. Concentrate on the person in front of you who has a need, not the milling crowd. Such attention might not seem sensible, but it is central to the ministry and mission of Jesus.

So, what would it mean for us to practice this kind of selective attention? We begin by letting go of the bitterness that arises whenever we feel that God is focusing more on others than on us. The Pharisees and scribes grumbled because Jesus spent more time welcoming tax collectors and eating with sinners than he did with them. “Typically, we want mercy for ourselves and justice for others,” says New Testament scholar R. Alan Culpepper, but these “parables call for us to celebrate with God because God has been merciful not only to us but to others also.”

We like to have God’s spotlight on us, instead of on some lost coin in the dark corner of the room. We want God’s zooming in on us, not on a lost sheep. But here is the thing: God’s selective attention is always on those who are lost, rather than those who are found. Our challenge is to rejoice with Jesus, whenever a coin is found, or a sheep is restored to the fold, and be thankful that God’s mercy extends to us as well. Each of us is a recipient of God’s unconditional love and unlimited grace. “I once was lost, but now am found,” says the hymn *Amazing Grace*, “was blind, but now I see.”

After letting go of our bitterness, we can join Jesus in his ongoing search, using the spotlights and zoom-lenses available to us. We can put a spotlight on our youth by putting time, energy and money into youth ministries and services. Youth naturally want to belong to a group that loves and accepts them, and the church has much to offer in terms of solid and supportive relationships. For those who are feeling excluded, we can provide a sense of acceptance. For those who are heading in the wrong direction, we can help with a gentle turn toward God. After all, the core meaning of “repentance” is an about-face, a change of heart and mind toward God.

At the same time, we can use a zoom lens to focus on adults who are struggling to find their place in the church after pursuing their careers and raising families. While there is certainly a need to shine a light on all the adults of the church, we need to zoom in on those who begin to drift after their children are grown and move away. This is a time when careers can hit a plateau and marriages can come apart. Both men and women wonder what their purpose is, and what their involvement in the church should be. By zooming in on this stage of life, the church can help people with the challenge of turning around, turning back to God; again, what the Bible calls “repentance.”

If this sounds like an enormous task, remember that Jesus came to save the whole world; he only asks us to love and care for our neighbor, the person standing in front of us right now. Blogger Nadia Bolz-Weber offers some help in keeping this work in perspective. She used to live in an old apartment building with “super sketchy electrical wiring.” If she tried to run the hair dryer and the radio at the same time, she would blow a fuse. She writes: “I think of that fuse box often these days, because friends, I just do not think our psyches were developed to hold, feel and respond to everything coming at them right now; every tragedy, injustice, sorrow and natural disaster happening to every human across the entire planet, in real time every minute of every day.”

She offers three questions to help us discern where to focus our energies: What’s MINE to do, and what’s NOT mine to do? What’s MINE to say, and what’s NOT mine to say? What’s MINE to care about, and what’s NOT mine to care about? “To be clear,” Bolz-Weber explains, “that is not to say that it is not worthy to be cared about by SOMEONE, only that my effectiveness in the world cannot extend to every worthy-to-be-cared-about event and situation. It’s not an issue of values, it’s an issue of MATH.”

Jesus wants us to love everyone, just as he does. But at the same, time, he challenges us to focus our selective attention on the lost coin, not the nine that are still in hand. He pushes us to go looking for the lost sheep that is wandering, not the 99 that are safe in the flock. When we do this, we become part of a heavenly party in which everyone rejoices and celebrates together.

Prayer: Faithful God, we have sinned against you and are not worthy to be called your children. Yet that is what you call us once we put our faith in Christ. Thank you for receiving us, like lost sheep, back into the fold. You show us how much you value us that you did not leave us in our lost state but sought us out so that we might turn to you. Help us to appreciate the joy that fills heaven over each sinner that repents. Help us to share that same joy. Help us, now that we are walking with you, to be among those who join you in bringing other lost sheep back into the fold. Give us the privilege of seeing the lost found and returning to you. In Christ, Amen

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**Selective Attention**

Sunday, September 11, 2022 [Luke 15:1-10](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+15%3a1-10&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Life is always coming at us. The honk of a car horn from the street outside. A ray of sunlight coming through the window. The smell of perfume in the air. A pinch in the toe from new shoes that are a little too tight. The taste of a peppermint candy in your mouth. Each of us receives a continuous barrage of sensory information through hearing, sight, smell, touch, and taste.

If we paid attention to every one of these sensory experiences, we would be overwhelmed. So, to compensate, we center our attention on the most important elements of our environment and let the other things blend into the background or slip by us unnoticed. Educational consultant Kendra Cherry explains it this way: “Imagine that you are at a party for a friend hosted at a bustling restaurant…Multiple conversations, the clinking of plates and forks, and many other sounds compete for your attention. Out of all these noises, you find yourself able to tune out the irrelevant sounds and focus on the amusing story that your dining partner shares.” It is amazing, really, that we can focus on what someone is saying, even though the restaurant is full of distracting sounds and smells and sights.

This ability to focus on just one aspect of your environment is called “selective attention.” Preachers hope you practice selective attention every Sunday in church, when you concentrate on the sermon instead of being distracted by sound of the motorcycle outside, or the sight of the kid in the pew two rows ahead, or the smell of the coffee wafting up from downstairs.

Of course, selective attention is not always needed. Twenty-one years ago today, we sat glued to our television sets as images of the Twin Towers in New York City, burning and collapsing after being attacked by terrorists, grabbed our full attention. No one needed to tell us to concentrate on these images. It was impossible to look at anything else.

Most of the time, we must be selective about the things on which we focus because we simply do not have the brain capacity to concentrate on all the sensory stimuli that bombard us. “In order to sustain our attention to one event in everyday life, we must filter out other events,” says author Russell Revlin in his book, *Cognition: Theory and Practice*. “We must be selective in our attention by focusing on some events to the detriment of others. This is because attention is a resource that needs to be distributed to those events that are important.”