

Sermon - 09/11/22

Text - Luke 15:1-10

Theme - "Lost and Found"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In our Gospel lesson today, St. Luke tells us that tax collectors and "sinners" flocked to hear Jesus. And not just a few of them, but lots and lots. So many, in fact, that it caused the scribes and Pharisees to grumble and complain. They felt that Jesus (if He truly was from God) should not be wasting His time on such riff-raff as that. No, He should be focusing on the "good" people, the deserving ones. You know, folks who were like THEM. They were worth God's time and attention and love. But not those others - those wicked tax collectors and prostitutes and other horrible outcasts and sinners.

To answer them and their complaint, Jesus tells two parables. The first was of a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to go and seek the one lost and straying one. Now, why would the shepherd do that? Shouldn't he have stayed with the ninety-nine? After all, they had not wandered off. They had not gotten themselves into trouble. They had stayed by the shepherd's side. Didn't they deserve his attention and care more than that one lost sheep?

But ALL the sheep matter to the shepherd. The lives of every single one of them were his responsibility. He cared for each of them. And so, the shepherd goes off in search of that one lost sheep. And when he finds it, Jesus says, the shepherd picks it up

and puts it on his shoulders and carries it home, rejoicing. So full of joy, in fact, that when he arrives he calls all his friends and neighbors over to a party, to help celebrate the return of that one lost lamb. Why? Because it was important and precious to him. Because it counted just as much as the other ninety-nine. Because he loved it. Despite its foolishness, its stupidity, its sin in wandering off from the shepherd's side.

In the second parable (very similar to the first), Jesus tells of a woman who has 10 silver coins. They are all that she has. So, when one of them turns up missing, she does not stop looking until she finds it. She lights a lamp, she sweeps the whole house, she gets down on her hands and knees to search every crack and crevice for it. And when she finally finds it, she too calls together her friends and neighbors, so they can share in her joy in its return. Because that coin was precious to her. Sure, she had nine others. But that doesn't change the fact that the tenth coin also was valuable – just as valuable as the rest. And so, she drops everything to find it, even at the cost of such hard and tedious labor.

Of course, Jesus was sending a message. A message to those scribes and Pharisees, to be sure. But also a message to those *"tax collectors and sinners"* that St. Luke mentioned. Jesus wanted them to know that **THEY** were precious and valued and loved by God, too. Despite what the scribes and Pharisees thought. Despite what the world said. Despite the accusations of the devil. Despite what their own fears told them. **THEY** were that one lost lamb, that one lost coin. And God would do anything to bring them back where they belonged – back to fellowship with Him.

Imagine, if you can, the impact these parables must have had on those folks. All their lives they had been told that they were too far gone, too wicked, too late to be saved. That unless they measured up to the standards put forth by the likes of those scribes and Pharisees, God had no interest in them. And yet here was Jesus – a prophet, and maybe more than a prophet – telling them that was all wrong. That God still loved them. That He had sent Jesus to seek the likes of them, to find them, to pick them up and carry them home to Him. What unbounded joy, what incredible relief, what a sense of connection with the Lord those parables must have brought those outcasts, who had been written off by society and their fellow Jews.

And at the same time, there was also a message in those parables meant for those scribes and Pharisees too. They were not any better or more deserving than those tax collectors and sinners. They were not more loved. They had no corner on God's affection or care. No, His love is just too great to be so limited.

And that they were NOT as perfect and holy as they thought, either. That is the subtle point of Jesus' words ("*...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance*"). Sure, they saw themselves as righteous and better and without need to repent (unlike those terrible tax collectors and prostitutes and such), but that is not how God sees them. God's standard is not "better than the next guy" but perfection. And they certainly were not perfect. No more than were those they wished to exclude from Jesus' company and attention.
(pause)

You see, it all comes down to how one tries to approach God: under the Law or through the Gospel. The scribes and Pharisees imagined that the best way, the correct way, the right way was under the Law. Hadn't God said "*do this and you will live*"? Hadn't God threatened punishment -- eternal punishment -- for those who disobeyed His commands? And so, the scribes and Pharisees strove to "*do this*" -- that is, to keep the Law of God. They certainly worked hard at it. And they succeeded -- at least so they thought. They imagined they had done enough to show God their sincerity, their worth, their goodness. And **that** is where they placed their trust.

But they had forgotten one thing: God also made it clear that NONE of us keep the Law as He demands. Nor can we. That is the consequence of Adam's sin -- we are all conceived and born sinful. As our own lives demonstrate: our inherited sin leads to sins of thought and word and deed. So those holier-than-thou Pharisees and scribes really were not all that holy. They were sinners just as much as those tax collectors and prostitutes. In their own ways, they too had wandered off from God. They too deserved His wrath and punishment. They too needed a Savior, someone to find them and bring them home to God.

But for those "sinners" (as the upright called them) who flocked to Jesus, they recognized and confessed their failures to measure up under the Law. They were under no illusions as their own goodness or merit. They knew they were unclean, foul, lost. They knew they could do nothing to make themselves holy, or to reclaim a place in God's family on their own. But when they hear Jesus say He has come for just that

very purpose, they clung to Him with all their might. He was their only Hope, and they knew it. So, they put all their trust in Him – in the Gospel, in God’s grace and mercy and undeserved favor.

In short, they let God be God. They did not try to earn their way into heaven, but threw themselves onto His mercy. They trusted the Good Shepherd to be their Savior. No trying to deal with God on an equal basis, no self-righteous claims, no pretensions about themselves at all. Their only salvation must be outside of themselves. It must come from God alone. (pause)

At the end of both parables we hear the amazing words: *“Rejoice with me, for I have found the sheep (or coin) that was lost...”* Think on that for a moment too. What makes God happy? Is it our good works? Our lives of love? Our efforts to “be good”? Well, what makes Him MOST happy, what causes His GREATEST joy, is when the lost are found.

Oh, I am in no way saying that our efforts to follow the commandments, to do as He has said, make God UNHAPPY. Of course not – for He has told us these things are pleasing to Him. Nor am I saying that we can act any way we wish and that is OK with the Lord – for the commandments ARE His holy Word too. No, what I am saying is that what **most** causes Him (and all the company of heaven) to rejoice is when we put our trust in Him, not ourselves. When we live as His forgiven children, and not as those who must work their own way into eternal life. When we live under the Gospel, and not the Law. Because that is the only way we will be with Him – only by trusting

in His grace through Christ Jesus, who lived and died for us. His life of obedience, not ours. His death on the cross to pay for our sins, not good works. His suffering hell so that we might have heaven. Believe THAT and you cause mirth and joy in heaven – among the saints and angels, and for God Himself. (pause)

Just like those tax collectors/prostitutes/sinners, and just like those scribes and Pharisees (for, remember, Jesus lived and died for them too), YOU are precious and loved. God has put an infinite price tag on you – He loves and values YOU so much that He would (and did) come down from heaven, take your place, suffer and die, even endure hell for you. Never forget that. Even if others see you as unwanted or useless, God never does. You are **everything** to Him. He has come for YOU. He has claimed you. He has saved you. He brings you home. You were lost but have been found. So rejoice with Him. Now and forever. In Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS - Offertory/Offering
FE - Nicene Creed