

SERMON FOR TRINITY III – JUNE 20, 2021 – LUKE 15:1-10

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." ³So he told them this parable: ⁴"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷Just 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. ⁸"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹And 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.' ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Have you ever lost something important, and couldn't find it for a long time? As the old saying goes, "I found it in the last place that I looked." I sure hope so – we wouldn't want to find it, and keep on searching for some crazy reason! Some of us might lose our car keys, or wallet, or more importantly in this day and age, our cell phone. It's been said that the "smart" phone is the thing that would cause us to turn around and go back home to get, even more than our wallet, even if it took quite a bit of time, because it's more important to us on a daily basis. Hard to believe that something only invented in 2007 has become so ingrained into our daily lives, but here we are! Anyway, if we can't find our phone, and

didn't leave the ringer on, we can become quite frantic until we find it – we can't "call" it if the ringer is off. Our phones have our calendar, our contacts, our banking information, even sometimes our credit cards, on them. I even saw an item on the news recently about a new gadget that we can attach to our keys, or our phone, or anything else we don't want to misplace, that we can, with the help of satellites, retrieve in short order. But, you have to sacrifice some privacy and control of who knows where you are in order to utilize such a handy tool.

In our text, Jesus describes in a parable a lost sheep and a lost coin. He was speaking to the Pharisees and the scribes, who were marveling that He would take the time to associate with tax collectors and "sinners", rather than with "righteous folks" such as they thought they were. In fact, they were looking down their long noses at Him, and deriding Him for spending time with the dregs of society, rather than those who were confident that they were keeping the Law of God. They had done all of the proper sacrifices; they had paid all of the offerings to the church; they had even left work to be done on the Sabbath, because there was no way that they were going to violate the Commandment. They were so pious and holy, that they had invented hundreds of laws to fill in the blanks that Moses forgot in the first five books of the Bible, so many laws that most people couldn't even keep track of all of them. They were holy and righteous, at least in their own eyes.

At first, we might think that this parable concerns evangelism, seeking out the lost, doing everything we can to bring the lost sheep and the lost coin back to its rightful owner, safe from the marauding wolf or the thief who might pick up the coin and steal it. To a certain extent, this is certainly true – we are to have a heart for missions, to reach out to those who haven't yet heard the Gospel message, and do whatever is necessary to speak the truth of the Word of God to them. To not care that there are many people who, through their rebellion, are destined for the fires of hell every day is heartless and contrary to the love of God in Christ Jesus. However, there's another meaning here, the reason that Jesus told this story in the form of a parable, so that the hearers (the Pharisees and the

scribes) might not pick up on the purpose of His example, and it would only be clear to those of us who have the benefit of reading the whole story of creation through the Resurrection, and even the predictions of the end of time. We've got the whole story, the entire Scriptures, while the entire truth was kept from the religious leaders, at least for a time, so that they would be motivated and willing to go through with killing the Lord of Life for the greater good of saving mankind from sin. Let's unpack this parable a little bit more, and see if there's more to it than just a push for reaching out to the lost, which is the meaning that most of us have heard from the time that we were little children.

Shepherds worked in intensely difficult circumstances – this job certainly wasn't for everyone! They would work out in the desert, for months at a time not seeing another human being. A modern-day similar profession would be that of a cowboy in the Old West, or a semi truck driver today. Lonesome, high stress, danger all around – this was the life of a shepherd. The perils of living out on the range, or contending with heavy traffic on the freeways – these are similar to the dangers of being a shepherd. That's why it was so surprising that they were some of the first evangelists of the New Testament – they were visited by an angel, obeyed the beckoning summons, and journeyed to the Christ child in the manger. Then, when it was all over, and they had seen the Savior Himself, they went back to their charges, telling people along the way what had happened – those within their sphere of influence (mostly other shepherds). They were rough men, probably not very talkative, and this which they had seen was pretty out of character for them

It had to be a pretty big thing for them to leave their charges out in the field, and journey to the manger. It took an angel appearing to them! Or, in our parable, for the shepherd to search for the lost sheep that had wandered away from the flock. What would happen to the other sheep? Wouldn't they be in danger from the same perils that the shepherds were there to protect them from? Normally, the shepherd, who lived with his sheep, cared for his flock like his own family, wouldn't abandon the others in the field. This would be contrary to their every intuition and instinct. The simple point is – they

wouldn't leave them alone. They wouldn't risk having ninety nine sheep at the mercies of predators, for the sake of one. It's so absurd to suggest that they would do this.

But, aha! That's the point of Jesus' parable – remember not only the fact that this was an example to illustrate a point, but also the audience that Jesus was speaking to (the self-righteous, the ones that were depending upon adherence to the law to save them). We must interpret this in another way, that wouldn't go against the nature of the shepherd to protect his other sheep, but also does justice to the plain words of Jesus' parable. What, indeed, does it mean that they were lost? What is the context to which Jesus was referring, just before and after our appointed text?

The task of the church, and the pastor, is to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments, rightly and purely. Without this Word and Sacrament ministry, no one will be led to the truth of God's Word; rather, they will all be lost. They will be left defenseless for any wind of doctrine, true or false, to afflict them and drive them away from the truth. Let's consider a definition of lost – the fires of hell. Many are going there, which is the only place where God Himself is not present at all. He's present in heaven, of course, in all of His glory. He's present on earth in limited, veiled form, along with the presence of the evil angels. How did the proverbial sheep get lost? They separated themselves from pure preaching and right doctrine. In the case of human beings, this could involve separating himself from the body of the church physically, such as not attending worship, or doing so sporadically. But, this could also involve the hardening of the heart to the preaching and administering of the church – disdaining the pure Word being proclaimed. This is dangerous – it's like an infection – once it starts, it taints everything

So, how do we fix this? We must repent, realize that we are all sinful men, that we have sinned in thought, word and deed. That's why the confession and absolution precedes the Lord's Supper – confessing our sins and receiving God's absolution is the best way to prepare ourselves to rightly receive the Sacrament of the Altar. For those sins that we know and feel in our hearts, the pastor is available to

hear them, and once they are confessed, he can specifically pronounce the FACT that those sins, indeed, that sinful nature, which is confessed to God with a pure heart is forgiven and forgotten by Him, forever. It's a reiteration, to be sure, but it is intended for the comforting of souls. According to Martin Luther, the only reason that we retain confession and absolution in the church is for the sake of the absolution, which is, in its purest form, the Gospel itself.

How do we know this from the text – that there's more going on here than just zealous outreach for those who have fallen astray from the church? We know that shepherds wouldn't normally leave the rest of their charges in the field and search for a lost sheep – it just wouldn't happen. Jesus was talking to those who thought they were just and righteous already, and didn't need to repent. Also, and maybe most revealingly, why do the angels in heaven rejoice? Let's hear it again, in verse 7: 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. There is rejoicing over finding the lost sheep, or the lost coin, to be sure. But the rejoicing is because of the real reason that they were lost – because they would not repent. Once they repent, then all the vaults of heaven resound with shouts of joy. It's one thing to lose a coin or a sheep – but that's something of this world. What Jesus is talking about is something of the world to come – eternal salvation vs. eternal condemnation

Let's make sure that we realize the real reason for Jesus' parable, and not grasp at something that's parallel and peripheral to the point. It's easy to do that, because it's what we want to think that the text is speaking of. The duty of all Christians is to reach out to those within their sphere of influence, speak the reason for the hope that lies within them, and when the working of the Holy Spirit has reached its crescendo, or climax, then bring them into (or back into) the preaching and teaching and administering of the church. The duty of the church, and her ministers, is to nurture and TEACH those under its care, to make sure that the members don't fall into great shame and vice (false doctrine certainly falls into that category). It's easy to be misled, especially in a world that is foreign and

antagonistic to the church, as our society is becoming more and more every day. Isn't it surprising that the reaction in heaven is not that the lost item is found, but that sinners repent and realize that they are sinners, in desperate need of the forgiveness of God?

As we follow this one-year lectionary, there are some surprising texts that we are confronted with. Later on in the Trinity season, we are given the parable of the unjust judge, which stymies many commentators that specialize in interpreting parables. Just next week, we jump to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, that on the surface of it says that we shouldn't judge anyone, lest we be judged. However, as we'll see, there's a lot more to that teaching than meets the casual eye. We must be prepared to dig deep into these texts, and hopefully catch the hidden meaning that Jesus intends for us to glean, given our much wider lens which we're given to understand the Word of God.

However, in our text for this morning, we need to understand this in light of the context that surrounds it. At the beginning, Jesus is speaking to those who are upset that He is associating, and not shunning, those who are known to be public outcasts. They think that He should spend His time with them, because they have devoted their lives to observing the law, to the exclusion of those others who should be disregarded. What Jesus makes clear to them, in the form of a parable, is that the most important thing for us sinful human beings is repentance and forgiveness. The greatest need that mankind has is the forgiveness of our sins. Without it, we are going to be cast into the fires of hell. With it, we are made inheritors, sons of God, adopted into His family through Baptism, washed of our sins by the same, and nourished and fed in both body and soul in the Sacrament of the Altar. The Word of God underpins these Sacraments, and because the Word is so powerful, it has the power to do what it says, totally on its own. God's Word is creative, it is self-fulfilling, and it does miracles.

Immediately after this text in Luke's Gospel comes the parable of the prodigal son. If there was ever a son that was not deserving of forgiveness by his brazen actions, it was this younger son. Yet, Jesus tells this parable to illustrate that deservedness doesn't determine forgiveness on the part of the

Father; His unconditional love and mercy is what causes the prodigal son to be forgiven and welcomed back into the fold of the family. It's in this context that Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep – the desire of God Himself is to have all of us confess our many sins, be removed from the peril and danger of the evil one, and be restored to Himself by His all-surpassing love and mercy. We are no longer lost, but are found, because we repent of our many sins. We are welcomed back to the righteousness of God because of His abundant forgiveness. That's the point of this parable that Jesus tells to the Pharisees and scribes. We, too, must hear it, repent, and believe the Good News. The Holy Spirit works through His Word and Sacraments to bring this about. Thanks be to God for His unprecedented love, mercy, and grace. He has truly done everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.