

September 15, 2019

Pentecost 14/Proper 19

Text: Luke 15:1-7

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus] ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." ³ So 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? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And 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.' 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. (ESV)

Lost and Found

When we lose something precious to us, we spare no effort to find it. It is even more so when the lost is someone we love.

Several years ago, there was an earthquake in Armenia. A father sought desperately to find his son. He had been buried alive in the rubble of a collapsed building. With only his hands, he started tearing away the debris that entombed his son. After ten hours, his hands were a bloody mess. But he wouldn't quit. After 13 hours he pulled away a large rock. Against all odds, behind the rock, he found his son. And he was alive. Can't you just imagine this father's joy! The lost had been sought and found!

We can all understand this kind of joy. But what the world can't understand is Christian joy. It can't understand that nothing can separate us from the love of God. It can't understand how we can have joy inside our tears. It can't understand the greatness of Christ's compassion for sinners. He is like a shepherd who loves his lost sheep so much that he will search and search until he finds it. Yes, he seeks, finds, and saves us. This gives us great joy!

Let's see why as we look at the parable of the lost sheep. It was occasioned by the Pharisees. They thought Jesus was hanging out with all the wrong kinds of people. He even ate and drank at the same table with tax collectors and notorious sinners. In our day, that would be like hanging out with drug dealers, prostitutes, and convicts.

The Pharisees thought they were God's favorites. After all, they went to church and, outwardly, made a point of showing how religious they were. But God saw right through their sham religiosity. They weren't righteous; they were self-righteous. They were spiritually lost. In fact, without repentance, they would end up in hell. In the parable, they are the 99 sheep who think themselves righteous and in no need of repentance.¹

But the tax collectors and sinners knew they were lost. They did not hide the fact. They were drawn to Jesus and came to hear him speak ... especially to hear him speak about the kingdom of heaven. This parable was intended to show the Pharisees that God earnestly seeks to find lost, penitent sinners such as the ones they despised.

But more than that, he wants to show them that all of heaven rejoices over one such sinner who

repents!² Would the Pharisees learn from this? They should have. They should have learned that they, too, needed repentance. We will never know if any of them ever did.

How is it with you and me? Sometimes we act like the Pharisees. We assume that all is well with us. We all assume that it's the other guy who needs to repent. The opposite, however, is true. We also need repentance as much as they do.

We may think that withholding our tithes and offerings is no big deal. But the Bible calls it "robbing God" (Mal. 3:8). We may think that forgiveness is no big deal. If so, we are wrong. A famous general once said to John Wesley, "I never forgive." Wesley replied, "Then, I hope, sir, that you never sin."³

Wesley is right. Consider the words of Jesus. He says, "If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."⁴

In light of eternal judgment, he who refuses to forgive others breaks down the bridge over which he himself must walk, for everyone has need to be forgiven.

But let's now focus on the parable itself. A man has a hundred sheep, but one strays. Who cares about the one when you have 99 others? Jesus does! He immediately leaves the rest to search for the one. What we have here is a picture of Jesus going after the lost soul. He searches for the lost sheep until he finds it.

As he returns home, there is a smile beaming from his face. He calls to his friends and neighbors, saying, "This, my precious sheep was lost, but now it is found." And how does heaven respond? Jesus says, "There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repents."⁵

See how precious the lost one is to him. He leaves the ninety-nine for the one. To him we are not merely a social-security number or a bank-account number. He knows us by name. Every one of us matters to him. To Jesus, the individual is precious. You are precious.

- See him turn aside from the masses to speak to the adulterous woman at Jacob's well. He tells her about "living water" that will spring up to everlasting life.⁶ She comes to trust in him. And all her townsmen as well.
- See him cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene and change her life from a living hell to a living, loving disciple who would follow him to the ends of the earth.⁷
- Hear him speak the words of life to the penitent tax collector Zacchaeus. The Pharisees despise him, but Jesus loves him. He tells Zacchaeus to come down from the sycamore tree because he wants to speak to him. To him he says, "Today salvation has come to this house!"⁸

How wonderful! Each one of them has been lost, sought, and found! The Lord's concern is so sharply focused on the individual, the lost sheep, because of what's at stake. If the lost is not found, it will perish forever.

How do people become lost? The first thing we must say is that people are lost, i.e., spiritually

dead the moment they are conceived. The sin of Adam is charged to their accounts. King David knew this truth, for he said, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”⁹

But God has given us a most precious gift to work saving faith in the hearts of infants and little children . . . children who are born dead in their trespasses and sins. That gift is holy baptism. At our baptisms, something remarkable happened. God charged the entire righteousness of Christ to our accounts. He also gave us a new set of clothes, i.e., he clothed us with the robe of Christ’s righteousness.¹⁰

But what happens to a child’s baptismal faith if it is not fed by the truths of God’s Word? It can die of malnutrition! And if it dies, God holds the parents responsible! (See Matthew 18:1-6).

But teen and adult Christians can become lost as well. They can become lost by not reading and hearing God’s Word. They can also become lost by absorbing the beliefs, ethics, and values of the culture.

How many, I wonder, fall from the faith by walking in unrepentant sin? Too many. Let me give you an example. In a recent study conducted by ChristianMingle.com, Christian singles between the ages of 18 to 59 were asked, “Would you have sex before marriage?” The response? Sixty-three percent (63%) of the single Christian respondents indicated yes.¹¹

This is astonishing! Apparently, these unmarried Christians see no conflict between being sexually active and God’s commandment to be chaste. They have drunk deeply from the well of our culture where sex is thought of as just a normal human behavior with no limits or boundaries.

Their sexual values are not biblical or God-centered, but personal and culturally centered. Such people are lost and perishing. And many don’t seem to know or care!

We can also stray from Christ by becoming apathetic and bored with God’s Word. And the further you are from Christ, the less you feel your sins.

Martin Luther once said, “If you actually no longer feel any sin, then you most certainly are dead in sin.”¹²

But thank God the way of repentance is still open. No matter what our sin, Jesus paid for it on the cross. Thank God that, when we were lost, he sought us and found us. Through faith, he cleans us up and forgives all our sins. Each Lord’s Day, he comes to us with his forgiveness and salvation in the Word, bread, and wine.

Likewise, God has given us everything we need to create, sustain, and strengthen saving faith in the Word and Sacraments! Through these means the Lord finds us and sanctifies us. We were all born lost. But the Lord has sought us and found us by the Word and the Sacraments. And about all of us who have been found by him, Jesus says, **“There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”**¹³

May our holy God continue to give us his holy gifts so that we may be his holy people, people found with him in the life that never ends.

I will be, then, by the grace of God, the honest, truthful, loving, forgiving, committed child of God -- daily in his Word, growing in his grace, transformed from within. May God grant this to us all for Jesus' sake: ἄμην.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Endnotes

¹When Jesus says in v. 7, “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” the Lord is speaking paradoxically. The ninety-nine think they are righteous. But they are not. They are self-righteous. Hence, they see themselves in no need of repentance. They have no idea of the actual, filthy condition of their hearts. And so Jesus leaves them to their own devices. The lost sheep (person) knows that he is lost, repents, and receives Christ’s righteousness. He, then, is the one whom Jesus seeks and finds. If the Pharisees would ever come to see themselves as the lost sinners that they are, Jesus would seek after them as well.

²See Luke 15:7, 10.

³See <http://lbbfchurch.wordpress.com/2011/12/10/are-you-good-at-forgiving/>

⁴See Matthew 6:14-15, ESV.

⁵See Luke 15:7, 10.

⁶See John 4:1-42, especially vv. [John 4:10](#) and [14](#).

⁷See Luke 8:2. It seems certain that Jesus was the One who cast out her demons even though her exorcist is nameless.

⁸See Luke 19:9.

⁹See Psalm 51:5, NIV.

¹⁰See [Galatians 3:27](#).

¹¹See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/may/2051214.html>. See also, <https://www.oldfashionedmovie.com/blog/?p=154>.

¹²Quotation as cited at <http://cyberbrethren.com/2013/06/19/i-dont-feel-like-taking-communion-luther-responds/>.

¹³See Luke 15:10, ESV.