

“Lost and Found”

Sermon for Third Sunday after Trinity, Gospel, St. Luke 15:1-7, Immanuel

*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. * And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “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? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 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.’ 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. (Luke 15: 1-7, ESV)*

Today’s text from Luke, chapter fifteen, deals with lost and found things, too, a sheep and a coin, and a soul. The parable about the lost sheep is a favorite of artists. You have probably seen paintings of the shepherd carrying the sheep back, slung over his shoulders. It’s a comforting image, that of our Good Shepherd retrieving the lost sheep from danger, starvation, or a violent death at the hands of predators or of falling off a steep cliff. That’s what we want our Savior to do, to protect us, to bring us back when we go astray. Why wouldn’t we rejoice when that happens? Well, some didn’t in Jesus’ time as we see in the text. They resented Jesus seeking out the lost, those who had strayed. They, though they found it easy to forget all their own sins, sternly condemned the sins of others— the sins of the tax collectors, despised in Jesus’ day as corrupt agents of the Roman authorities, and sinners, that is, those whose sins were obvious to everyone, lawbreakers, prostitutes, the blind, lame, lepers, whose diseases supposedly were evidence of sin. These gathered around Jesus to hear Him talk. They had heard that He was a good man, and He didn’t distance Himself from people like them, as the Pharisees did. He even ate with them. But the Pharisees and scribes who saw these people near Jesus grumbled about this and said, “This man... (they couldn’t even say His name), this man receives sinners and eats with them.” And this wasn’t the first time either. Jesus had eaten with Levi, the tax collector and his fellow tax collectors and other sinners earlier in Luke’s Gospel, where the Pharisees and scribes complain to Jesus’ disciples that He eats with these people. And it wasn’t the last time either. In chapter nineteen we have another example where Jesus eats with a despised tax collector, Zacchaeus.

Jesus hears their grumbling and responds to it with two parables to explain to them what He is doing and how their grumbling is misplaced. In the first parable He says, who of you, if you had a hundred sheep and one was lost, wouldn’t leave the ninety-nine (in the care of other shepherds as was custom) and look for the lost one until you found it? Then when you found the sheep you would rejoice and take the sheep home and call the friends and neighbors together and celebrate. The Pharisees and scribes certainly understood this story. They wouldn’t simply write off as a loss a sheep that had wandered off, if there was a way to recover it. They would go looking for it, or send servants to find it. Then Jesus says that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one man who repents than in ninety-nine who don’t need repentance, the faithful who stayed with the flock. Surely the Pharisees see that a seeking and finding the lost should cause rejoicing, not grumbling?

Then, to give another example, Jesus tells a parable about a woman who has ten gold coins, but loses one. She lights a lamp and sweeps the whole house until she finds it and when she does, she also calls together her friends and neighbors for a party. And who would begrudge her joy? The Pharisees and scribes would have to admit it would be hard not to rejoice with that woman. And Jesus says, “See, it is like that in heaven when one sinner repents.” “This is what my Father sent me to do, to seek the lost. That’s what I am doing now.” Don’t grumble, rejoice.!

But they didn’t rejoice, as we know. They continued to grumble about Jesus, watching Him like a hawk, hoping to catch Him violating the Law or traditions, no matter how small, some slip of the tongue, some blasphemy with which to accuse Him. For Jesus’ teaching offended them. It made no sense. The way they saw it, if a Jewish man, like these tax collectors and sinners were, rebelled against God’s holy law, they should be punished, shunned by God and righteous men, forgotten, left to suffer the effects of their rebellion. The Pharisees knew the Law, that the wages of sin is death,

but they forgot the Gospel promise, the Good News of forgiveness as the prophet Micah spoke in our Old Testament text today: “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of His inheritance? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; He will tread our iniquities under foot.”

That’s what God was doing in His Son, showing compassion right before their eyes. Compassion means “suffering with.” Jesus suffered with and for us. Jesus took on our flesh and blood, suffered temptation like us, but without sin. He even suffered death for us. For God sent His only Son to bear our iniquities on the cross and to tread them underfoot. Jesus crushed the head of the serpent, defeating sin, death, and the devil with His resurrection. God sent Him to gather a people for Himself and to seek the lost, both those who wandered off from flock of faithful, and those who were outside the flock, that they might be saved.

And Jesus finds the lost by calling out to them with His Word. When we hear the Word of God in Scripture, in the songs of the church, in the preaching of the sermon, in the words of absolution, we hear our Savior, our owner, calling to us to repent of our unbelief and trust in Him. The Holy Spirit works to create, sustain, and strengthen our faith through the Word. This is why memorization of the Word is so valuable, memorizing Scripture, the small catechism. For in times of temptation and doubt, when we are apt to forget our way back, the remembered Word of God will be a lamp to our feet, showing us again and again the path that leads to repentance, to forgiveness, to being found in Christ again.

God calls the lost through His sacraments, too. He calls the lost, which we all were at one time, to be part of His family, to become His adopted brothers and sisters in Holy Baptism, where He puts His Triune name on us. As we remember our baptisms every day, repenting our straying ways, the Old Adam in us is drowned in contrition and repentance, and a new man emerges and arises to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

So let us never grumble because of the Lord’s overflowing grace toward repentant sinners, nor His joy when He brings them back. For we were all lost at one time, and have been saved by God’s continual grace, not by any good in us. As Saint Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, chapter 2 “for by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.” (Eph. 2:8.) Christ has sought all of you, from your childhood on. He sought you when we were baptized, whenever the Gospel was preached to you. He sought you in confirmation and in His Holy Supper. In all that has happened in your life He has sought you. And he is seeking you this morning, when He brought you to this church to receive His gifts of grace and pardon, with which He finds the lost.

He will never lose you. You may stray, but He will never lose you or forget you. In Isaiah 49, the Lord says, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands.” (Is 49: 15-16).

And you faithful, you ninety-nine who have not strayed, who are already in the Shepherd’s protection, remain with Him. Don’t let the world entice you away from the truth of God’s Word, or let your feelings of unworthiness frighten you away from your Shepherd. It may seem sometimes as if God has forsaken you, the faithful, who week after week attend church, who volunteer for church activities again and again, who offer of your worldly treasure faithfully, even sacrificially, often without any recognition or thanks But God has not forgotten about you. He remains with you, His own sheep, until the end of your wanderings in this life. He says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27-28).

May your Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, find you here with your brother and sisters in faith, gathered around His Word and Sacraments. May the joy that you have as Jesus’ flock here at Immanuel overflow from you so that others will see it in your lives and in your good works and want to have what you have. They will see that Jesus receives sinners and works repentance and faith in Him- that Jesus seeks the lost. And you too will rejoice with all the company of heaven and the saints on earth when the lost sheep are brought home to the Kingdom of God, now and forever. Amen.