

Luke 15:1-10

¹ All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ He told them this parable: ⁴ “Which one of you, if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that was lost until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls together his friends and his neighbors, telling them, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!’ ⁷ I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.

⁸ “Or what woman who has ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, would not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found the lost coin.’ ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Seeking the Lost

I.

He had been convinced he could take care of himself. He could do it just as well as that man who was always leading him around. There hadn't been any dangers for some time now. As every sheep knew, there were pleasant pastures and safe havens all around. He was convinced he could find the best of the best all on his own.

And so...off he went. At first he just lagged behind the flock until no one seemed to take notice of him anymore. Then, into the bushes, and through that little stream over there and he would be on his own. At last! There was no one to tell him what to do. He munched on the lush grass he had noticed as they were passing this area recently with no one to tell him what to do or where to go or how long to stay. He was his own sheep! He was a rugged individual at long last.

After a while, Mr. Sheep began to get a bit nervous. The shadows played across the meadow. Were those hawks? They never bothered the whole flock, but would they come for him now that he was on his own? No. He figured he was too big for a hawk to bother. Still the shadows played. Buzzards seemed to be circling. Was there already something for them to feed on, or did they think he was soon to be a goner and they could get a quick meal? There! Was that a wolf lurking at the edge of the trees? Mr. Sheep was starting to see ghosts everywhere.

The shadow loomed large, right over him. Then it stopped moving. It was all over but the bleating. What relief washed over the sheep when he looked up and saw that the shadow was his shepherd. He deserved a smack on the rump with the shepherd's staff as he was driven back to the safety of the flock, but instead he saw a face filled with love and concern. Rather than the smack he had expected, hands reached down and picked him up and he was carried on the shepherd's shoulders back to the flock.

A debate raged among the Pharisees in Jesus' day. The debate was about which sort of person makes God the happiest. There were two theories. The first was that the person who had been basically righteous all his life made God the happiest. Such a person always tried to do what God wants of us. Never had there been serious moral issues in life. That person had always lived well and had been a joy to be around. The other theory was that God was actually happier with a person who had lived a bad life, but had repented and had come to the Lord.

Which camp would *you* be in?

People and sheep are not such different creatures. Jesus intended for the sheep in his parable to be compared with a wandering person. The wanderer is someone who made all sorts of bad choices in life. You know the type: a school dropout who developed all kinds of addictive habits, lived a promiscuous lifestyle, and wasted everything he had. One day he hit rock bottom, and he realized something had to change. He turned his life around, separated himself from all kinds of evil things and from people who were bad influences, and decided to live for God from then on. Years later, at his funeral, he was praised for how he had turned things around in his life.

The other kind of person is the one who never left the flock in the first place. Someone who always appeared to be well-adjusted. He did his homework, grew up, got married, had children, and went to church his whole life. At his funeral he was praised by everyone as a good guy who had always been there for others.

Which kind of person makes God happier? “I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent” (Luke 15:7, EHV). Does Jesus’ parable about the sheep give an answer?

II.

Here’s the dirty little secret: Jesus wasn’t too happy with *either* camp.

Today’s Gospel contains two parables in a pack of three Jesus told to make his point. In the Lost Sheep, 1% of the sheep was lost. In the parable of the Lost Coin it was 10%. The final parable is the parable of the Lost Son, otherwise known as the Prodigal Son. In *that* parable, *both* sons at one time or another showed themselves to be “lost.” Jesus escalates his calculation of “lost” through his telling of these three tales.

The son who was not the prodigal in the third parable thought he was in great shape. *He* was the one who was obedient. *He* did what was just and right. He *deserved* to get something from his father.

Look at the beginning of today’s Gospel. “All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:7, EHV).

He wasn’t attracting people who were good at all. Jesus was welcoming *sinners* to come and eat with him. They hadn’t yet put their lives back together. They hadn’t done anything to redeem themselves. They hadn’t pulled themselves up by the bootstraps. When these people came to eat with Jesus they were dirty, rotten sinners. They were in all the wrong categories. They were prostitutes and liars and cheaters. They were not people who had turned their lives around, they were still headed the wrong direction.

III.

“Which one of you, if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that was lost until he finds it?... ⁸ Or what woman who has ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, would not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?” (Luke 15:4, 8, EHV).

Did you notice in the parables that were in today’s Gospel that the sheep didn’t find his way back to the shepherd and the coin certainly didn’t find the woman. It was the shepherd who had searched who found the sheep and the woman who swept her whole house looking who finally discovered the valuable coin. Even when it came to the Lost Son, the father had stood in the road watching for his son to return. The son realized he didn’t deserve *any* favor from his father—he just wanted to become a servant.

“Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!...Rejoice with me, because I have found the lost coin” (Luke 15:6, 9, EHV). You remember that the story of the Lost Son ended the same way—with a party.

Every single one of us has been in the “unrighteous” category, no matter how great our life looks in the outward appearance. The important picture reveals a Savior who is delighted to find and save sinners. When he finds them, *all* are invited to rejoice, because he rejoices. His rejoicing cannot be contained. He wants others to share it with him.

Jesus has saved you by his blood, but it’s more than that. You bring him joy. It’s true. Your personality, your interests, your contributions, and all kinds of other things about you bring Jesus joy.

“I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent...¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:7, 10, EHV).

In these parables it isn’t a person’s sterling qualities that bring joy to the Lord, is it? What brings joy is the lost and wayward sinner who repents. You can see the present tense in the translation:

repents. What you *can't* see in the translation is that the kind of verb form indicates an *ongoing* action of repentance. In other words, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner (or bad person) who keeps on repenting.

Since there are really no good people who have completely turned their lives around and no longer *ever* do anything wrong, there are no people who don't need to keep repenting. You still keep on sinning, so you still need to keep on repenting. But that brings Jesus joy. That brings joy to heaven itself.

IV.

That sounds completely mixed up. *That's* what brings the Lord joy? Repentance? *Continual* repentance? The fact that we come back again and again and again and keep on repenting?

Imagine how that would work with your anger management counselor or therapist. Every week you sit down and report how well you have done in the past week. If you say you have managed to control your emotions and you didn't injure anyone or even yell at anyone. *That* is when the therapist would rejoice. "Good job!"

But if you report that this week you have lost your temper four times, yelled at people, and even lashed out and tried to hit someone, but this week you're going to try harder, what will be the reaction? The therapist will express disappointment in your ongoing behavior.

Not the Lord Jesus. "Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!"⁷ I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:6-7, EHV). There is no party thrown for the 99 sheep. The party is for the lost one that was brought back again.

If that same sheep has a bad week next week and wanders off and has to be found again, what will be the result? Another party. Another rejoicing over that lost sheep that had to be found—yet again.

It's as if you told the therapist: "I had another terrible week. Please forgive me. I'll try harder next week," and the therapist calls all his or her friends to tell them to rejoice in the fact that you failed, but still kept your appointment.

It's not what you would expect, but that is the Lord's reaction to your confession. Your confession brings him joy.

Run through the list of Commandments in your head. Which of them have you broken—this week—again? Remember to use Luther's explanations, drawn from the rest of the Bible that remind you that those sins run deeper than what it might look like on the surface. Have you complained about your life? Have you had evil desires about human sexuality—perhaps while looking at a screen? Have you snuck around and tried to cover your tracks? Have you told lies to make yourself look better? Do you daydream about how much smarter *you* are than some public figure? Have you lost your temper? Have you yelled at them from the safety of your car?

You do these things and think that you get away with them. Most of the time you don't get into any trouble for any of these things. You think God doesn't notice or care. But he does, and he does. All of these are offensive to God. All of them are dangerous, because they all weaken your faith.

You are not among the 99 righteous people. No one is. That was the point Jesus was trying to lead his listeners to realize. You ought to repent. But not just because of the sins you realize are so devastating in your life, but because heaven rejoices over you. Christ Jesus paid for your sins by dying on the cross. God *cannot* hold them against you now that Jesus has paid. God does not *want* to hold them against you. He simply wants to have you.

When he finds you—for the third time this week, or the third time today, he treats you like the shepherd treated Mr. Sheep. He doesn't shake his head at you and give you a long lecture. He doesn't make you feel like you're dumb. He doesn't ask when you will *ever* learn.

He rejoices that you were lost, but now you are found. He counts you and sees you as perfect and holy and innocent. He, and all the angels of heaven, rejoice in your ongoing repentance and faith. You were lost, but you have been found. Again. Amen.