

Sermon Reading: Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

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

Sermon Theme: Joy When the Lost is Found

We probably all know someone who is known as a “lost cause.” They keep on doing it, they never listen, and no matter what you try and do nothing seems to work. You try and try again; but there’s only so much. In a gasp of hopelessness, despair, and frustration there’s nothing left to say except: “They are a lost cause.” But we don’t give that title because we no longer care for the individual. No, more often, we simply don’t know what to do. It’s hard to stay motivated when we face failure; especially when it seems like they have no interest in being found. We deal with the same thing when someone strays from the church and seem to have lost their way. What are we supposed to do?

In Luke 15 we see a group of people who—according to society—are a bunch of lost causes. And that title was not thrown on them for no reason. Because of their profession, the lifestyles of their past or even are currently living everyone knows they are tax collectors and sinners. Everyone knows their sins and knows who they are. But these people—the sinners—also recognize a friend when they see one. They gather around Jesus to listen to him.

But the Pharisees and teachers of the Law are less than impressed. You can hear them grumbling and complaining, “This one”—they aren’t even going to name Jesus because they are disgusted so much by his actions—“This one welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

But what they see as disgusting, Jesus shows them that it's not out of line at all. To show that, Jesus teaches a parable, a story that teaches deeper spiritual truths about God's kingdom. **Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?** What else is a shepherd supposed to do? Of course he will go searching for the lost sheep. And he will not stop searching no matter how hard it is or long it will take. He cares for the sheep and what happens to it. And when he finds that lost sheep, you can see the smile and relief cover his face. He picks it up, drapes it around his neck, and with joy in heart and extra skip in his step he heads home. He is so excited that he calls his friends together and brings his neighbors over; this is good news that he needs to share and celebrate! He says: **Rejoice with me! I have found my lost sheep.**

Jesus point: you do this for an animal...why would you not do the same thing for a lost sinner who is found? Especially when, **there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.** The Pharisees only saw lost causes and were putting limits on God's love and forgiveness. They could not see that this is exactly what Jesus came to do. At the same time, they are missing out on the celebration and experiencing that joy when the lost have been found!

You know better. You know Jesus wants all people to be saved. And there's still that little Pharisee in each of us that has a hard time when we see someone else's sins. We know that their sin is no greater than our own. And, yet, how we treat them and how we may talk about them puts "me" on a pedestal looking down on them. "I know I'm a sinner too, but at least I don't...I would never...I can't believe they..." The little Pharisee in us shifts the focus, downplays, and ignores your own sin. But what might fail to see is how we put limits on God's grace that keep you from seeing how much you need Jesus and, at the same time, from seeing that this person—no matter the sin—what they really need is Jesus! Especially if that person you know is stuck in a sin, it helps no one putting them down while raising yourself up. Jesus makes it quite clear: he came to seek and to save the lost.

Then there are the other times. And these times can be very difficult for us because we know the lost. We have a love for the lost. We want the lost to be found. We want them to come back. But, how?

Jesus gives us a different perspective. This time a woman has 10 silver coins and loses one. **Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?** Of course she will! She's down on the dusty floor sifting through it all. Lamp shining in every dark corner she inspects every inch of the house as she sweeps and

searches. You've been there before. To someone else it wasn't worth all that much. To another person they would have just let it go. But not you; no, you kept on searching, turned the house on top of itself, could hardly sit still until you found it. And then when the lost is in your hand you let everyone in the house and the surrounding area know when you cried out, "*I found it!*" You could not believe it. Such relief. Such joy...**Rejoice with me! I have found my lost coin!**

Just as the shepherd knows his lost sheep and the woman her lost coin we know the lost. They are your neighbors and friends. They might be your children who have wandered from the church or it's your grandchild. They may be your relatives who can't be bothered to come back. You've tried once; you've tried a thousand times. But nothing. You want them to come back. But, how?

You maybe push it off onto someone else: "They are the pastor's and church's problem now." You may make excuses for them or you blame the circumstances that led up to them leaving. Or we simply we use someone's personal responsibility as an excuse to not reach out. I know how easy it is to say the church times and address are still the same—they know where to find us. But when someone is lost, more often they do not want to admit it. Because that means admitting you took a wrong turn along the way. Or, they often do not realize it. they may be perfectly fine with where they are at in life.

Again, it's not because we don't care about the people. You have a love for the lost. The last thing we want to do is write them off. But you know it and I know it: it can be so frustrating and discouraging so that our sinful nature says, "It's not worth the effort." And the devil comes and tells you, "They aren't going to listen to you anyway." While the world around us says, "You are fighting a losing battle. People just aren't as interested in God's Word anymore. They are too busy and have too much going on." And the resounding and recurring theme is: people are too lost to bring back.

Whether your fight is against that little Pharisee in you or it's against the rising feeling of despair when reaching the lost, remember that in Jesus' eyes each lost soul is precious and dear to him. That includes you too. As Isaiah wrote, we are all like sheep who have gone astray with each of us turning our own way (Isaiah 53:6). But your Good Shepherd did not give up on you. So that you and I might have a home in the green pastures of heaven, the Good Shepherd goes, takes up our weaknesses and carries our sorrows and sadness. He gets into the dirt and grime of this sinful world to find you. He does what it takes because we were lost in sin, slaves to its desires, under the rule of the devil. And so the Good Shepherd comes to set you free. God strikes Jesus on the cross where His hands are pierced for our sins. God's just judgment crushes Jesus when he carries your sins on his body. He chooses to do this because he is the Good Shepherd who loves his lost sheep. He knows that this punishment will bring you peace with God.

Because by his wounds, you are healed. Sins are forgiven. Guilt is removed. Satan's head is crushed. Freedom is won. All is well between you and the Father who showers you with limitless grace. Jesus lays down his life for us, the sheep, to pick it back up again on Easter morning to give you a new life with him.

And he continues to go to work to make it your own. He worked through your parents, or a pastor, a teacher or a friend and he brings you to him. When the water used with the Word was poured over your head in Baptism, the angels in heaven rejoiced and celebrated because another lost soul has been returned and snatched from Satan's hands. When you fall into sin and wander from the Shepherd, Jesus calls out to you through his Word to bring you back. And the angels rejoice and celebrate again because the lost is found. Jesus welcomes you with open arms and invites you to his own special meal in the Lord's Supper to forgive your sins and draw you to him. He reassures at that Holy Supper that you are not a lost cause, sin hasn't separated you from him, "Your sins are forgiven!" And when you stray again or you lose your way, your shepherd still does not give up on you. He continues to work through Word and Sacrament, through other people to bring you back.

And now he works through you. We have over 290 sheep who belong to this fold; 290 people whose names are on the membership list of Zion Lutheran. Yes, the work is hard. Yes, believe me I know, it is discouraging at times. Whether or not it is easier or more difficult to reach someone when you know them already does not matter. We can't just say someone else is going to take care of it. God knows that I can't do this on my own. And my God is so gracious and abounding in love that he doesn't leave me to do it alone. He gives me you—the exact people I need to help me carry out this work. And then he assures you and me both—we aren't in this alone. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and knows the ones who are lost. Jesus works through our feeble misguided efforts. He rules over our words and actions and uses them, no matter how awkward they might seem. Since he already knows the lost on a personal level, He can name them and claim them in ways that we will never fully be able to imagine.

It's not about filling the pews and patting ourselves on the back. It's about finding the lost. It's about bringing them back to Jesus. Trusting in that love that Jesus pours out on us, trusting in the Word that God promises will never return to him empty but carry out its purpose, it gives us confidence to speak. We speak the very same Word that works in our hearts. Then sit back and watch because our work ends and His begins. Jesus searches out for those for whom He came, He has died, He has risen and ascended to Heaven to call his own. And what rejoicing there will be when we get to join with the angels as even just one lost soul is found. Amen.