



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 15, 2019

“God is Still Doing What He’s Always Done”

(Luke 15:1-3)

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“Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ Then Jesus told them this parable. . .”
(Luke 15:1-3).

*Every day, Everywhere, By Everyone,...sharing
the grace of the Good Shepherd.*

Collect: Lord Jesus, You are the Good Shepherd, without whom nothing is secure. Rescue and preserve us that we may not be lost forever but follow You, rejoicing in the way that leads to eternal life; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Did you notice the contrast? The Pharisees and other religious authorities gathered around to mutter and grumble about Jesus. The sinners and tax collectors gathered around to *listen* to Jesus. The tax collectors, of course, were those treacherous collaborators who all but sold their souls and their country to the Romans for personal gain. The sinners were all those other men and women of ill repute, folks who didn't even try to live by the law anymore. To associate with them was to be polluted by them. To befriend them and eat with them . . . unthinkable! But that's precisely what Jesus did. Though they were oddballs and outcasts, Jesus slowed down and spent extra time with them, getting to know them so he could teach them and serve them.

These tax collectors and sinners regarded Jesus as their Friend. Therefore, the religious authorities regarded Jesus as their enemy. They could not understand why he should spend so much time with those sinners, unless, that is, he was one of them. "Birds of a feather" sort of thing. So they made their judgments about Jesus, and kept their distance from him and the other sinners for fear of being guilty by association.

Jesus responds to their muttering with three quick parables in succession: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost (or "prodigal") son. The first two make up our Gospel lesson. The prodigal son is not included in our Gospel lesson but is a part of his response. In any event, it's a trilogy of joy, joy that comes over finding that which was lost, whether a sheep, a coin, or a child.

First, Jesus asks the Pharisees, "If you were a shepherd with a hundred sheep and you lost one, what would you do about it? Would you ignore it? Would you shun it? Would you despise it?" Of course not! A real shepherd would search for it and keep on searching, quote, "until he finds it." You can't have a lamb wandering out there in the woods. It's as good as dead. So there's no giving up. And when he finds the lost sheep, he

rejoices. It's not just because he's recovered one percent of his flock. No, he has a certain compassion and care for his sheep. The shepherd even invites his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him which is kind of odd, but there's a reason for it. Jesus tells us why. "I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." Undoubtedly the ninety-nine of which Jesus speaks are the Pharisees and scribes and many others, who, if only in their own minds, are righteous, but all their righteousness is as filthy rags. They are smug in their sin. There's no joy in heaven over that.

Jesus continues with the parable of the lost coin. A woman has ten silver coins and loses one. The coin mentioned here is a drachma and it amounted to a day's wages for a laborer. To lose one is not the end of the world, but it's no great shakes either. It is ten percent of this woman's life's savings. So, she turns her house upside down and inside out. Like the shepherd, she looks for the coin *until she finds it*. There's no giving up. According to Jesus, God is like this woman as she rummages through the house. When she finally finds her coin, she feels joy and relief and insists on celebrating her find with friends and neighbors.

Once again, it's kind of odd that a woman would throw a party over finding a lost coin. It's not that Jesus is a clumsy story teller. In the parables, when something sounds odd or unrealistic, that's the place to pause and ask, "What is Jesus up to here?" In this case, why is this woman throwing a party after finding a lost coin? I think Jesus is inviting his critics and us not to begrudge the lost ones being found, nor the effort it takes, but to celebrate when they are found.

On the surface, both parables seem to be saying the very same thing. Something is lost. . . is found, and there is rejoicing. So, we might think the second parable about the coin is redundant, not even necessary. After all, what does it really add?

The ancient church fathers had a lot of fun answering that question. They said if the shepherd in the first parable is Jesus, (the Good Shepherd), then the woman in the second parable is the Church. That the Church should be personified as a woman is natural enough. She is, after all, the Bride of Christ. As the woman earnestly seeks her lost coin, so the Church earnestly seeks

to recover the lost sinner.

The early fathers also noticed that in the first parable the sheep strayed on its own. It just followed its nose from one green tuft of sweet grass to the next, and before long it was entirely lost and isolated from the flock. There are people like that. They don't intend to wander off, but do so anyway, not so much out of wickedness as aimlessness. Maybe you do that too. The Prodigal son, on the other hand, he rose up in rebellion and nearly ran to the far country knowing precisely where he was going. There are people like that too. And you've probably done that too.

But in this parable, it's the fault of the woman, right? She loses the coin. That is, the church loses the person. She can blame no one but herself. This happens easily enough in the church when we fight or quarrel about things that matter little. It happens easily enough in the church when we bruise each other with careless words. It happens easy enough when the eye says to the hand, "I don't need you." It happens easy enough when we defer to the rich and influential and mostly ignore the poor and uneducated. So, the woman carelessly loses a coin. It happens often actually.

I'm not sure Jesus intended to say all that, but it's intriguing. And it is part of the ministry of the church to seek the lost. I see it as a challenge to this church. We can do better than we've done in searching for the lost. The elders and I try in fits and starts, and we get discouraged and start again. But this work doesn't belong just to them or me. It's a job that belongs to the woman. It's a job that calls for the efforts of the entire Church.

If it's your daughter who has wandered off, your daughter who does not welcome any more talk from you about turning back to the Lord . . . if it's your daughter, how good it is to know God is still in the business of seeking the lost. He has enlisted his whole church to do it with him. So, maybe where your daughter works, there will be someone who, maybe three years from now, in God's name, and by his inspiration, will say just the right thing at just the right time, and the lost will be found.

Keep in mind God arranges such opportunities for you with someone else's lost child. God can inspire you too to say

just the right thing. It will always, always feel clumsy and awkward, but God can use even our feeble, misguided efforts to reach out to the lost. He governs our words no matter how awkward they might seem. Besides, often it's the effort that means the most; it's the care you have more than the words you use.

There are some other things going on in these three parables. Note the proportions of loss. There are a hundred sheep. One is lost, and that represents just one percent. Not a big deal . . . *unless* you happen to be that one lost sheep for which the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine so he can go out and look for you. In the second parable, there are ten coins. One is lost. That's ten percent, and more serious. In the last case, there are two sons, one (the Prodigal) is lost. That's fifty percent, but feels like a hundred percent; it is absolutely heartbreaking. In any event, the percentages don't make a bit of difference when it comes to the zealotry of the one searching. The shepherd goes out and searches for the lost lamb "*until he finds it.*" The woman searches for the lost coin "*until she finds it.*" The father of the prodigal does not give up hope, but patiently waits until his son comes home. In each case then follows a big party when the lost is found.

That's how God still works in the world. That's how God still loves the world. He does not give up. He does not forget about us. He does not abandon us. He comes looking for us when lost. It's at the very heart of his ministry. In Luke 19, Jesus says, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Often, Evangelical Christians get this all wrong. They like to talk about when they found Jesus. Maybe it feels like that, but the lost lamb doesn't find the shepherd, and the lost coin doesn't find the woman. And God isn't hiding in the first place; he's on the hunt. He's like the shepherd searching for his sheep. He's like the woman ransacking her house. He's like the father who keeps glancing down the lane looking for his prodigal to come over the horizon. He's the One way back in Genesis 3, walking in the garden in the cool of the day, making a big racket actually, trying to flush Adam and Eve out of the bushes. "Adam, where art thou?" Our God seeks the lost. He treasures them. And

when he finds just one, he cannot contain the joy. “Rejoice with me” he says.

You know, when I first looked at this text last week, I thought to myself, “What on earth am I going to say that I haven’t said before? These parables are so familiar. You probably know what I’m going to say before I know what I’m going to say!

Therefore, I’ve sometimes tried to mix it up and find something new and surprising. Once or twice, I’ve dug up a cultural detail in a text and tried to make of it a big deal, as if it were the secret to understanding the text. At times I’ve tried to be extra creative, throwing in some rhetorical flourishes and maybe a little humor too. I’ve tried all that and more and have disappointed many in the process.

I’ve come to realize I don’t have to be extra creative or clever with these old familiar texts. I don’t have to squeeze something new out of the ancient. I’ve come to realize there’s value in simply repeating the familiar. In fact, if the message is not worth repeating, it’s probably trite, and God’s Word is never trite.

Besides, in a world that keeps on changing, how good it is to know that God remains the same. With today’s text in mind, in a world where it’s so easy to get lost, how good it is to know that God is still doing what he’s always done. He’s still seeking the lost. He’s still on the hunt. He’s still whacking the bushes to flush out those descendants of Adam and Eve who think the answer is in hiding from God. God is still in the business of finding the lamb who has wandered off, the prodigal who has stormed off, and the coin that the woman misplaced. And when he finds it, (when he finds you, me), he doesn’t begrudge it. He doesn’t resent the effort. No, he calls in his friends and neighbors and says, “Rejoice with me.”

God is still doing what he has always done. He is still seeking and searching for the lost. And still celebrating our return. “Rejoice with me.” Amen.

