

Luke 15:1-10
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 14, 2025

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable...

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Notice that St Luke says that Jesus told them "this parable." But our text seems to mention *two*. Does St Luke not know how to use basic grammar? Or, maybe he was simply referencing the first, then decided to tack on the second? After all, the rest of the liturgical propers seem to focus on the first! Look at that Old Testament reading, look at the Collect of the Day. **Or**, does St Luke and – more importantly, Jesus – see them as one?... one in meaning and purpose.

In fact, you might recall that these two stories are followed by a third – the parable of the prodigal son; and, you might recall that that relationship helps us think of the sinner as not just 1 of 100, or 1 of 10, but even 1 of 1 – just "me." Just "you." There's a unity of thought and purpose and teaching in these stories (whether we refer to them as one parable or three parables... or, in our text, two of the three parables)... so we do well to see them together. And, to especially see *these* two together, as the third story *does* have some unique features to it by which it stands alone... and so it is often

taught alone. (We'll get to that.) But, these two parables are undoubtedly meant to be seen together, so let's consider them *each*, that we may recognize Jesus' *one* teaching purpose.

First, Jesus paints the picture of a shepherd noticing one of his sheep has gone missing. The use of the image of sheep should catch your attention because sheep are the Scriptural image for those who belong to Christ. We know that motif quite well:

- "The Good Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep"
- We just sang, "The King of love my shepherd is;"
- The Old Testament reading – the Lord says, "I myself will search for my sheep... As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so I will seek out my sheep."

So, when you consider this parable of the lost sheep, be careful who you consider the lost sheep to be! Ought we really think of the sheep as some poor nameless soul out there who has never heard the Gospel?... just 'those tax collectors and sinners' that have very little chance to make it into heaven... or even 'those grumbling Pharisees and scribes, so self-righteous they'll *never* get into heaven!' Is that how we should think of this lost sheep?

If so, are we any different than the man in the crowd (recall him from a number of weeks ago)... the man who pontificated about whether the nameless, faceless could be saved... because, after all, we are pretty secure in ourselves!

No, the one who is lost is one of the sheep, from within the sheepfold... one who has wandered from the sheep. Wandered because of distraction, because of something in daily life momentarily consuming his attention, perhaps *his cross to bear* (consider last week's text) that he's having trouble bearing and is tempted to put down his cross, surrender to the fallen world, and at least have the green pastures of temporal peace.

And, does such spiritual wandering require you to even leave the pew? Why do we assume the wandering of sin is one of physical distance? Is that really the point of the parable? Wasn't Jesus responding to a pharisaical grumbling about sinners who were coming to him, who were gathered physically to hear him, who were desiring to dine with him (locally, physically)?

So, the *wandering* sheep is the one whose *heart* wanders... who thinks Self is so safe. It won't get it into trouble, **OR** it has its *own* ability to get out of trouble. So safe and secure that it doesn't *need* the Shepherd. The wandering sheep is one who, in spirit, leaves the flock long before leaving the flock by physical separation. In fact, the lost sheep *could* be the pharisee who assumes he hasn't wandered from the flock at all, but assumes he's 'the first' of the sheep, nearest the shepherd and deserving to have a seat near the head of the table, one of those 99 who don't need repentance!

Yes, the point of this parable is a spiritual wandering... and the danger of spiritual wandering. In fact, the Greek word we

translate “lost” could also be translated “destroyed; perished.” In other words, there’s an *urgency* to finding the wandering soul, to calling that soul back to safety. Notice how the parable ends with Jesus explaining that call back to safety... He names it *repentance* – “There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who *repents*” – the parable includes repentance, because repentance leads to safety, to security.

And yet, the parable isn’t *primarily* about repentance, as if repentance is what saves. The focal point of the parable is the love of the shepherd: “When he has found [his lost sheep], he lays it on his shoulders, *rejoicing*.” He puts all the weight of your wandering on his shoulders. When you can’t carry your cross, He still carried His. He puts all the weight on his shoulders; He ‘pays the price’ required and does all the legwork needed to get you back to safety (there’s the work of the cross, there – in application – is the forgiveness of sins, the *distribution* of the forgiveness of sins), and He *rejoices* over your safety.

And having called out to the lost sheep, having found the sheep in its despair of Self, its repentant desire for safety in its trustworthy Shepherd, having hoisted that trembling sheep on his shoulders, he *comes home* with it and calls together his friends.

That’s quite an image to cherish – for, more accurately from the Greek, he “*comes to the house*” – is there any house of safety other than the sanctuary of God? – He “*comes to the house*” and he

calls together (congregates) his *philous* – not just friends and neighbors – his “beloved”... the faithful. And he says to them, “Rejoice with me!”

Now, how do we hear that exhortation, “Rejoice”? Do we often hear it as a command, a command to pretend excitement, to stand in fake celebration when you really don’t feel up to it? Is that the Church’s rejoicing? Going through the motions because you’re expected to!

But rejoicing doesn’t start with the cold hearts of sinners. Rejoicing begins with Christ! He rejoiced *first*! The Good Shepherd rejoiced first! And His joy is *infectious* precisely because it is rooted in the objective truth of the most marvelous salvation! Remember, the word “rejoice” comes from the word “joy,” and the Greek word for “joy” (χαρά) is related to the Greek word for “grace” (χάρις). To rejoice is not to feign excitement; it is to share Christ’s joy that the sinner who was lost in his sin and in danger of being devoured and perishing forever... that sinner has been called to safety by God’s grace, has been found and safeguarded by the forgiving Shepherd, and is safe in the house with the beloved. What pure joy! Anyone who has to feign excitement over that is just heartless! What pure joy! Moreso over one sinner who benefits from such divine love than over 99 who, even if in the sheepfold, claim a righteousness of their own and never rejoice in such goodness and mercy of our God.

And with that pure joy... a gathering together for the feast! How often have we heard that in recent weeks? We heard Jesus speak to those invited to a feast and choosing the place of honor, we heard him say to the host as a manner of describing Himself: "Invite those who cannot pay." We've heard him say "Come, eat and drink without price!" We've heard him warn that if we do not repent – if we wander in our sin – we might miss out on the feast! And we've heard him lovingly say, "Repent, and rejoice in My forgiveness, and – in that joy – you will share with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob the blest... and you will share with all your beloved of Calvary, and all the beloved of the house of God throughout the world."

Yes, how much does Jesus love *you* and rejoice over *you*, that the whole church may gather together and rejoice over each other, for each has been that lost sheep, wandering away in temptation and distraction, and yet – joy upon joy – here we are, called together and safe with Christ, to enjoy the feast.

Now, as I said from the outset, Luke writes as if these two stories make up one 'parable' – which you might think of as one 'teaching lesson.' So, this second story belongs with the first. How so?

If you think back to the text a few weeks ago – when Jesus was telling the self-secure man in the crowd (who was pontificating about all those lost people out there who couldn't be saved) – when Jesus was telling him that people would come from north and south

and east and west and dine with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob the blest – but that “you” (Jesus said to each of us) “you” could miss out if you refuse to repent – what was the response?: “We ate and drank in your presence! You taught among us!” In other words, “we’ve been with you all along!” the self-righteous say. And yet, in their self-righteousness, *lost*.

Isn’t that the second story in this unified lesson of Jesus? Where is the lost coin? It’s *in the house*! It’s always *been* in the house! It never left the house. But, it lies lifeless, helpless, needing to be found! And how does Jesus explain the parable? – “there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who *repents*.” Yes, we might have no ‘physical distance’ between us and everyone else in the house, including the host and Good Shepherd, and yet our hearts are far away. In fact, think of that *third* parable for a moment (and all of this will come together) – the parable of the prodigal son? – Who was the truly *lost* one? Was it *just* the one who squandered everything? Or was his brother – who had been in the house forever (“I’ve always been with you, father!”) ... He was self-secure that he always did the Father’s will – was he not equally lost in his self-righteous unwillingness to rejoice over the penitent?

And now you see why Luke refers to these first two parables as one parable... because they each tell you *half* the story of the third parable. The first parable is the son who wanders and spoils the inheritance; the second parable is the son who is lost in the house in

his self-righteousness. And, in that self-righteousness, a picture of the Pharisees, no... those who were grumbling? But also a picture of us if we refuse to hear the call to repent and run toward our safety in Christ Jesus.

Hear that carefully... throughout these parables, Jesus highlights the need to repent. There are two types of sinners, as these two parables show – the obviously “ugly” ones (‘tax collectors and sinners’ they’re called by the text, those who run away and ruin the inheritance), but also the less obvious, “less ugly,” but self-secure sinners (the Pharisees and scribes) who sit in the house forever in their self-righteousness, refuse to repent, refuse to consider their need to repent, and refuse to rejoice over their forgiven brother. Notice, there’s no difference between their ultimate standing: they’re sinners!

So, you are not rejoiced over because you’re “less a sinner” or “a different type of sinner.” Jesus doesn’t rejoice over you because of how well you ‘achieve’ repentance or because you repent ‘righteously.’ No, there’s nothing righteous about *any* type of sinner! But, Jesus repeatedly uses the word ‘repent’ to teach these parables because the call to repent is the call to safety, the call to be forgiven, found, secured, safeguarded by the One who cherishes you.

Indeed, your Christ *rejoices* over you, over your salvation and your safety as you’re cared for among his beloved... such joy over you that it is infectious for *all* the beloved of Christ: “Beloved in the

Lord! Let us draw near with a true heart!" Yes, let us draw near with a true heart and conscience, and let us rejoice that Christ cares for us where it is safe; where we have security in Jesus' forgiveness, and where – in such joy – divine feasting ensues. For, *all* the beloved, *all* our brothers and sisters, the angels and archangels and *all* the company of heaven, rejoice with Christ over your forgiveness and therefore laud His glorious name at such rich grace and mercy from this One "who receives sinners and eats with them."

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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