

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

ANNO † DOMINI 2022

Luke 15:1-10

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus tells two parables about lost things. This is in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes, who took offense at the tax collectors and sinners who were all drawing near to hear Jesus. "This man receives sinners and eats with them," they complained. Tax collectors were Jews who worked for the Roman government, collecting the required tribute, but often charging a little extra to keep for themselves. Sinners were just that: sinners, and notoriously so. These were people who had lost their way and found themselves in some pretty dark places. Not exactly the sort of company you'd expect a man like Jesus to keep. So, what was He doing with them?

He had found them. Remember last week's parable of the great banquet? When those who were invited said no, making excuses why they couldn't come, the master sent his servant out to the streets and lanes of the city to bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame. "*Compel* them to come in," the master had said, "that my house may be full." This is what we see happening in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus, who came to serve His Father in perfect obedience, had brought the Gospel invitation to such undesirables, saying, "Come, for everything is now ready." And the Lord had opened their hearts to receive it. They were humbled by the preaching of the Word, confessing their sin and seeking to enter the kingdom of God.

The Pharisees and scribes, on the other hand, refused to humble themselves. Why should they? They didn't see themselves as sinners! They had no need of repentance! So Jesus 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. Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Both the shepherd and the woman are a picture of Jesus, who, in His own words, “came to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). We understand something of this. We seek for lost things, too. My wife loses her phone all the time and can’t stop looking for it until she finds it. Whenever it’s time to go to the library, it seems, there’s always a book missing that we have to stop and tear the whole house apart to find. Just recently, I found the only pair of adult-sized nail clippers in the house after searching for *weeks*. This is what we do. We look for lost things. Because we care about them. We want to find them, and we don’t stop until we do.

But it’s not just that we seek lost things. We *are* lost things. We’re the lost sheep, the missing coin. We get lost. It’s what we do. “All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned—every one—to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). We were made to be righteous, to go *God’s* way. But we lost that image of God in the Fall. In its place, we have inherited from our parents the original sin of *pride*. Now, like the Pharisees and scribes, we seek to exalt ourselves, to go our own way, to make our own rules. Nevermind that the heart is deceitful above all things (Jeremiah 17:9). Nevermind that our adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8). Nevermind that the end of those things is death (Romans 6:21). We know what’s best (or so we think). And if the grass looks greener on the other side, then we can’t help but leave the God we love and go after it.

Little do we know, it’s poison. But there’s no going back. The farther we go, the darker it gets, and the more lost we become. We forget the way. No sheep has ever wandered its way *back into* the fold. No coin has ever *freed itself* from between the couch cushions. So, the author of Psalm 119 prays in the very last verse (176), “I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant for I do not forget your commandments.” Lost things do not find themselves. They can’t. Our only hope is that someone comes along and finds us.

The good news is we have such a one. We didn’t get it in our readings today, but the prophet Ezekiel talks about how in his day no one took care of the sheep. No one looked out for God’s people. No one went searching for them, because nobody cared. So, God finally said, “Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered...I myself will be their shepherd, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God” (34:11-12, 15). And He was. He Himself sought us out, when no one else would. He sent His Son to rescue us, to redeem us from our sins, to transfer us from the domain of darkness, and to prepare a place for us with Him. He searched *diligently* for us, leaving no prophecy or letter of the Law unfulfilled, sparing

no expense to purchase and win us from the tight spot we'd gotten ourselves, namely, His own body and blood.

And He hasn't stopped seeking us. That wasn't a one-time event, but our Lord, our Shepherd, still seeks us when we go astray. The woman in the parable lit a lamp to find her missing coin. Again, Psalm 119 says, "The Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path" (v. 105). You may think that you've come here to find Jesus, but reality it is He who is here to find you. He is here in His Word, and that Word is a lamp, shining into the darkness of our sinful hearts to show us the way. Earlier in the service you confessed that you are a sinner. How do you know this? From the Ten Commandments, which you have not kept. But you also hope to be saved. This you know from the Holy Gospel, that Christ died for you and shed His blood for you on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. Also, by His body and blood which He is about to give you in the Sacrament. Here, at the Lord's Table, Jesus receives sinners and eats with them. He forgives them their sins. He strengthens their faith and helps them to do better. You come as you are, but you leave as He is: holy and righteous in God's sight.

And there is joy. The Pharisees and scribes grumbled when they saw Jesus eating with sinners, but Jesus said that "there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Jesus isn't ashamed of you, anymore than He was with the tax collectors and sinners. He's not a Pharisee. He's your Savior and Friend. He's happy you're here. It gives Him great joy, even if you've been to some pretty dark places. The truth is He'd rather spend time with you than with a bunch of stuck up, self-righteous sheep. So trust in *His* righteousness, and rejoice in the Lord always. Do not grumble against others who draw near to hear Jesus, but welcome them, too. Rejoice with them. For this man receives sinners and eats with them. What was lost has been found. To God be the glory.

In ☩ Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo gloria