

“Seeking the Lost” by Pastor Steve Sommerer
 Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost Sept. 15th, 2019
 Sermon Text: Luke 15:1-10
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Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

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: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ 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.” So far the text.

Jesus came to “*seek and to save all who are lost*”, but the Pharisees didn’t hob-nob with the tax collectors and so-called “sinners.” One reason the Pharisees refused to believe in Jesus – despite His amazing miracles – is that Jesus received and welcomed and ate with sinners.

I think we struggle with parables like this one. We think of the Lost Sheep as those out cohabiting in sexual sin or wading in the pornographic sewer. We chafe at the idea this might have something to say to us. The “lost sheep” are the ones sleeping in this morning or out carousing last night. But Jesus’ parable speaks to you. You and I are the lost sheep. So, let’s stop wandering. The old saying goes, “When you’re in a hole; the first thing you have to do is stop digging.”

It’s easy in church, in some hypothetical way, to admit we’re lost, but in reality most of the time we think we’re fine on our own. I can easily find the faults and problems in my wife and kids, my neighbors and church members, but I’m far more tolerant of my own wandering ways.

That’s the truth, the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, and you and I in the parable aren’t the 99, we’re the ones that wander! Most of our days are lived out serving ourselves, thoughtlessly grabbing for the next clump of grass. We think that our goodness and admirable qualities have us smack in the middle of the flock, but God’s Law points the finger “You’re all alone! You wandered away from the Shepherd!” Isaiah says, “*All we, like sheep, have gone astray, each one to his own path.*”

Most people’s take on religion goes like this: “If I’m ever getting back with God, I’ve got to make the decision; to surrender my heart to Him; to decide for Jesus.” In the real world, that’s not how it works. You might fancy yourself able to lay hold of God and straighten out your life, but God’s reality is: The sheep doesn’t come home on its own. Jesus’ point isn’t just some lame version of now that you know you’ve wandered, come back. If that were His point, He would have told a parable about homing pigeons.

Kenneth Bailey, a Christian theologian living in Palestine, wrote:

“The image of the good Shepherd is now spelled out. The open pasture lands of Israel are rugged. Each rock could have a sheep quivering behind it. (Finding the lost sheep is no easy task!) The shepherd goes until he finds it. A sheep once lost is terrified. It sits down, usually in as sheltered a place as is immediately available and starts shaking and bleating. When found, it is in such a state of nervous collapse that it cannot stand or be made to stand. It cannot walk or be led, nor will it respond to the shepherd’s well-known call. If it is to be restored to the fold, the shepherd must carry it on his two shoulders. The animal can weigh 70 pounds. The country is rugged. It is a mark of the strength, courage, and character of the shepherd that he rejoices when he finds it.”¹

You and I are the ones Jesus came to find; we whose burdensome sins have been lifted on His shoulders; we over whom the angels in heaven rejoice. Jesus left everything behind to save you, “*though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor,*” Paul wrote. God sought you out. Repentance is the whole life of the Christian... but repentance isn’t how you get your head right and come back to God. It’s Jesus finding you and restoring you to the flock. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to call you in His Word to search out and gather all His sheep into the protection of the fold.

The parable of the Good Shepherd shows us just what God sent His Son into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish for us. Jesus lifted you to His shoulders and carried you. He lifted your sins to His shoulders and nailed them to the cross.

In the Catechism, we learned that we can’t by “*our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ our Lord, or come to Him.*” The Shepherd didn’t find the lost sheep, strike it, or yell at it. The Shepherd *rejoices* to lift the sheep on His shoulders. Jesus loved us so deeply, despite our wandering, and His love will sacrifice anything to restore us, even His life. 1 Timothy 1 says, “*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*” In Romans 5, Paul says: “*God demonstrated His love for us in this: That while we were still sinners Christ died for us.*”

In the waters of Baptism, God sought you out to bring you into His fold. Each day, this perfect love of the Shepherd searches you out to carry you back to the fold. Each day of our lives, the Holy Spirit seeks us, shows us our sin and carries us back to the foot of the cross, confessing our sins. And having confessed our sins, the Spirit pronounces His Word of forgiveness. But this same Spirit “*leads us in the paths of righteousness*”, enabling us to leave behind the things that lead to death and serve God “*in righteousness and purity forever.*” God helps you to live like a child of God, like sheep in the Shepherd’s flock.

Some still wander. Even in this place – even you and I – spend too much of our lives pulling at the next clump of grass filling our bellies, unconcerned that our Savior is searching for you and me and wants to bring us safely home. Dear friends, beware the night falls soon when the time for searching is over. Don’t put off another day learning and loving your Savior’s voice, as you and your family learn your faith. “*My sheep listen to My voice and follow Me,*” Jesus said, “*they will never follow a false shepherd.*” Let

¹ Bailey, Kenneth, Finding the Lost – Cultural Keys to Luke 15, page 74, Concordia Publishing House.

His voice of love fill your ears, and remember, “*Satan masquerades as an angel of light.*” His lies can seem attractive, but bring death.

Jesus the Good Shepherd is also the “*Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*” “*Jesus was led like a Lamb to the slaughter,*” Isaiah wrote, “*and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth.*” He routed the devil by rising from the dead... He calls you, His beloved lambs, by name.

Your Good Shepherd holds a feast, a meal of celebration: “*Rejoice with Me! I have found my lost sheep!*” For His baptized believers, there is a great heavenly banquet in your future, but even here at His altar the Good Shepherd gives you a foretaste of the feast to come. At this altar, the precious flesh and blood of Christ once nailed to the cross and defeated the devil by rising from the dead. This same flesh and blood He places into your lips as strength for the journey, the medicine of immortality. Your Shepherd promised, “*Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will rise Him up at the last day.*” Amen.

And now may the peace of God which surpasses human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.