

The Third Sunday after Trinity
25 June, Anno Domini 2023
St. Luke 15:1-32

Dear found of the Lord,

In the first two parables before us this morning, common sense would suggest that the owners just cut their losses and rejoice in what they still have - ninety-nine sheep still in the fold, nine coins still in the purse. “Don’t go chasing after bad” we might say. And that would certainly be easier. What’s one coin or one sheep? But notice how Jesus tells these two parables. In both cases they are told rhetorically. Of course you’re going to hunt down the things that you have worked hard to obtain. Of course you are going to put in the long hours at the office making phone calls, tracking down leads, doing the hard work to make your business successful. Of course you’re going to watch your investments carefully and not simply throw your money out the window. Of course if the bank makes a clerical error you’re going to press the point and make sure that every penny in that account is there.

We put in incredible amounts of effort to find our things that are lost. If you have a child who has a favorite toy or stuffed animal that gets lost, they and you will turn your entire life upside down trying desperately to find it. It doesn’t matter that before long they will break it and no longer even care about it. What then does it say when we are shocked, like the Pharisees, that God would work so hard to bring back sinners who have wandered? Why are we so quick to turn a blind eye when our children and friends stop coming to church and turn away from the faith all together? Why are we so willing to simply let them go without making every effort we can to save them from eternal judgment when we will stop at nothing to save our stuff that is here today and gone tomorrow? Why do we say nothing while they adopt the sinful lives and beliefs of the pagan world? Or why do we hesitate or even fail completely to share the Gospel with those outside of “polite society”?

In these first two parables, Jesus is teaching us chiefly something about God by arguing from the lesser to the greater. If we work so hard to get back earthly, fleeting things like sheep and money (and there is certainly nothing wrong with working hard to be a faithful steward of God’s gifts), are we really that shocked that God would work infinitely harder to find those whom He has created who have wandered off into the death of sin and unbelief, who have been lured away from Him by temptation and false teaching? What joy it is to find that which was lost - a favorite animal, the twenty dollars you stuck in a coat pocket last winter, your wedding ring that fell off when you were working outside! How much more

joy there is with God and all of heaven when a condemned sinner believes the preaching of the Law, repents, and turns in faith to God, seeking forgiveness? This is a matter of eternal joy because it is a matter of eternal life and death.

When you were rescued from the devil's kingdom, washed clean of your sins, and drawn up out of eternal death, shouts of joy and praise were raised by God Himself and His holy angels. Imagine that! Your salvation brings joy to God. God so desires you that He seeks you out and rejoices when He finds you and celebrates with the angels, the archangels, and all the company of heaven. God absolutely rejoices in you and in every sinner snatched from Satan's claws. He doesn't just desire sinners. He desires you specifically. He wants you to be saved. He wants every sinner to be saved. He wants every sinner to be covered by the Blood of Jesus and spend eternity with Him in His kingdom of grace and joy and life. God is not satisfied to simply have a lot of people. He cares about each and every one of His sheep, every detail of their life, every joy, every sorrow, every success, every failure every hair on your head. And that is equally true of every person born of flesh and blood. Without question, Jesus wants every person you come across to be in His Church receiving life from Him. There is no one, including you, that He would rather not have.

The truth is that all three of these parables reveal an ugly truth about us. We are nowhere near as loving and merciful as God, or even perhaps as we'd like to think we are. Indeed, like the Pharisees, we often hate mercy, especially when it comes to showing it to others. We associate our Christian faith with being more morally upstanding people. We aren't lying on the sidewalk passed out from drugs or losing everything we have at a casino. We aren't out there promoting abortion or jumping on the LGBTQ bandwagon. We haven't stolen anything. Thus "I am a good Christian." "I thank you Lord that I am not like other men."

It is easy to forget that we are in the Church precisely because we are the prodigal son and the sheep who willfully leave the good of our Father's house to chase after the shiny pleasures of the world. We trade the riches of Christ's kingdom - prayer, forgiveness, His Word, the sacraments - for fun, entertainment, money, beauty, etc. We lay the things of Jesus aside and use these other things as excuses imagining that God accepts those excuses and will accept them on the last day. As we heard again last week, He will most certainly not. We lay aside faith in Christ for resting on our laurels as though they in any way can justify us. We become like the older brother who believes he is a son because of what he has done rather than because of what his father has done. The older son despised the gift and so he despised the mercy of his father shown to his wayward brother. He thought he had earned his

inheritance. And certainly, the older son's obedience was good. We ought to keep the commandments. We ought to, as we will hear Jesus say in our Bible Class today do His words - all of them. We ought to love our neighbor, bear one another burdens and weaknesses, serve and honor our parents, help the poor, love and honor our spouse, call upon God, and remember the Sabbath Day. These are good things. But they don't make us sons. They don't save us. They don't make us Christians. God makes you a Christian. That is a gift given to you. He proclaims the Gospel to you. He gives you the Holy Spirit. He gives you faith. He forgives your sins. You don't do any of those things. He does them all.

God loves to have mercy on sinners. He does not despise us or look down upon us. He doesn't gloat over us or take pleasure in watching us wallow in the consequences of our sins. "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Tim. 1:15) You may have wandered. You may have used the inheritance of your sonship as an excuse and cover for evil. As long as it is yet called today, the opportunity for repentance remains and your heavenly Father desires only your restoration, to cover all your sins in the righteousness of Christ who shed His Blood for you. Through His servants and His Christians He seeks you out, calling you back. He doesn't want to strike deals with you. He is not interested in plea deals and promises you can't keep. He doesn't want you as a servant. He will only have you as a son, sitting at His table, feasting on His slaughtered Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose Body and Blood are the rich and saving food of your Father kingdom, filled with life and forgiveness for God's children. Let us then, in the same way, show mercy to those who have sinned against us, forgiving them quickly and being restored to them in peace.

Yes, the parables today certainly reveal something quite unpleasant about our own hearts which are quick to judge, quick to dismiss, and quick to become puffed up. But, even more importantly, the parables also reveal the unfathomable mercy of God for sinners and His fervent desire to save them, to rescue them from wherever they have wandered. There is no place too gross, too dirty, too forsaken where He will not search them out. And when He finds you He will gladly cleanse you again and take you back to His fold, His holy and beloved Church where He binds up your wounds, covers you with His righteousness, and gives you all the riches of His kingdom all the while rejoicing over you. There is no other God like our God, who joyously pardons our iniquities and passes over our transgressions, who casts our sins in the depths of seas that they may not stand against us anymore. This is your God. Return to Him for His desire is for you and for your salvation.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keeps your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord.