

Good News All the Way
Luke 15:1-10
First Presbyterian Church
September 15, 2019

Introduction to the Reading

You may know that Martin Luther called John 3:16 the “gospel in miniature.” Well, along with that this 15th Chapter of Luke might be called “the gospel within the Gospel.” And by that we would mean that beginning with the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin... and ending with the story of the lost or prodigal son... it is good news ALL THE WAY... because everything that is lost is found! This morning we read two of the three parables in Luke, Ch. 15. But before we do, let us pray:

Prayer for Illumination

May your word in Scripture find us wherever we’ve hidden ourselves, God. May it search us out and surprise us in our hiding places yet again this morning. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Luke 15:1-10

15Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just 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. ⁸“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When 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.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Sermon

These two back-to-back parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin may not be as familiar as the lost or prodigal son which comes next, but my sense is most of you know them all the same. The stories are simple and true-to-life... and though we may not understand many other parts of the Bible, it seems clear that the shepherd searching for the lost sheep and the woman scanning the dirt floor for her lost coin are emblems for God. The shepherd metaphor is quite well-known, of course. Jesus using a woman as a metaphor for God???? Well, that’s fresh and a bit edgy.

And as with all parables, there are many ways to hear them... to preach them... parables are like fine jewels – they have many facets to explore... and the facet I want to explore this morning is how these two stories emphasize the intrinsic value... the built-in preciousness... of each individual person. We see this in the shepherd's concern for that one lost sheep when he still has 99. It's right there in the woman's passion for finding that one lost coin when her purse is heavy with the nine, she still has. And for me, the inescapable point is that God (represented by the shepherd and the woman) is passionately concerned not just for "people" in general, but for each individual person.

There's an old Peanuts cartoon strip that some of you may even remember. In the strip the forever crabby character, Lucy, has just been confronted by Charlie Brown about her ill temper. Bless her heart, she was a very ill-tempered child. Well, Charlie Brown calls this to her attention and she defends herself with a line that has since become a classic: "I love mankind," she says, "it's people I can't stand." You may have heard that adapted to the church – someone might say, "I'm fine with the church, it's Christians I can't stand." Not Jesus. In fact, in telling these two stories, Jesus is saying this is NOT how it is with God's love. Yes! God so loved the WHOLE world... but not in a vague and general way. Instead, God – being God – is able to love the whole world in a startlingly particular and personal way.

We know this because of whom Jesus was speaking to that day. "Tax collectors and sinners were coming" to Jesus, Luke says. In other words, the social and religious dregs of the first century Jewish world were coming to Jesus. Roman tax collecting by Jews was a sleazy business... they were seen as cheats and traitors. "Sinners" were Jews of poor reputation in general... especially bad were those who failed to keep all the religious rules of the day. So, these two species of "lowlifes" are crowding around Jesus... and the Pharisees and scribes – the cream of the social and religious crop – were protesting that Jesus not only welcomes them... goes out to eat with them. So, in response to this complaint about the company he keeps, Jesus tells these stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and lost sons – and its good news all the way... because all are lost but sought by God anyway.

So, there it is:

God loves me, tax collector and sinner that I am...

God loves me with all my foibles and quirks...

God loves me with all my thoughtless mistakes
and chronic weaknesses...

God loves me with all my pride and self-centeredness.

Good news for me... and good news for you, too... sinners and tax collectors and all around less-than-perfect-people that you are! God loves you, too!

This is the very point Paul is trying to make to his young friend and side-kick Timothy in the passage John read earlier. With remarkable candor, Paul reminds Timothy that he, the great Apostle, was once a blasphemer, a persecutor, a man of extreme violence.

And in spite of being so very, very bad... so very, very lost... Christ found him on the road to Damascus... HIM of all people... stubborn, argumentative, narrow-minded, Paul.

The fact is when you read on in the Bible you find that God is routinely making outlandish personnel decisions. In the Old Testament, think of Moses – who was a murderer on the lam and who hated to speak in public. David – the runt of the litter and a philanderer to boot. The prophet Amos whose only previous experience was as a migrant farm worker.

And in the New Testament, it's not only Paul. There was Matthew, literally a tax collector. There was John the Baptist who lived out in the boonies, dressed in strange clothes (even for HIS time), ate bugs and yelled at people a lot. And then, there was Jesus himself. What an unlikely choice – born in a cave to an unwed mother... no formal education we know of, never traveled more than a hundred miles from home... not even 30 yet.

Of course, this litany of “unlikely choices” extends well beyond the pages of scripture. There's Francis of Assisi – “Saint” Francis to most of us – the spoiled brat of Italian nobility who paraded through the town square in the raw to make a point about materialism. There's John Calvin – a bookish, sickly French law student who was booted out of school and was on the run. And what about the man who wrote today's middle hymn, “Amazing Grace?” God literally found John Newton after he had run away from home as a teenager to become the captain of a slave ship. And how about Mother Teresa... we preachers always point to her? A displaced Albanian countess... willful and obstinate, politically incorrect... and now we know, she was beset by doubts and dark nights of the soul just like the rest of us. Lost – in their own way, all lost – but grace found them anyway, and grace took them as they were. And now, this veritable parade of those who are lost and found has marched right up to my doorstep and yours. God knows me... all of me... and found me anyway. God knows about you... all of you... and here you are anyway. For some reason, it seems God actually loves the likes of me and you... with our unique strengths and weaknesses... our quirks and gifts... our brilliance and dullness. The shepherd has been looking for me... the mistress of the house has been scouring the floor for you. Because we are accepted and loved just as we are!

But here's the “rest of the story,” as Paul Harvey used to say... It's not bad news... it's not a caveat... because there are absolutely NO if's, and's, or but's when it comes to the love of God... but you better know this... when you get found... when you fall in to the hands of this seeker-God, the very same grace that sought you is going to start to work on you... and in you... and all around you. And this grace is as relentless at shaping “found souls” into all they can be, as it is finding lost ones.

Again, this is not something to fear... God is not out to make you some generic, standard issue Christian. No, God is out to make you more and more the person God created you to be. If you're like me, that's a mixed bag. But God takes it all – the good and the bad – the strong and the weak – God takes it all and shapes you into the “best YOU” you can be – NOT somebody else – but the best YOU!

The wonderful Jewish thinker of the last century, Martin Buber, once told a story that echoes Jesus' point. It's about one of the greatest of the old Hasidic rabbis, one Rabbi Zusya. It goes like this: "Once, one of his followers asked, 'Rabbi Zusya, is that the way Moses would have done it? And Rabbi Zusya replied, 'When the time comes, and I ascend into heaven and Elijah comes to me, he will not ask, 'Zusya, why were you not like Moses?' He will ask, 'Zusya, why were you not Zusya?'"

Liza Minelli (of all people) said the same thing. She was asked in an interview how she dealt with the issue of whether or not to sing her mother's – Judy Garland's – songs. Her reply was, "My mother taught me early on that it is better to be a first-rate version of yourself than a second-rate version of somebody else."

So, my friends, come as you are (as if you have a choice). Come JUST as you are! For even now you are being pursued – sought after – and found – by a relentless seeker God... that Hound of Heaven... and like it or not, his grace is at work in you to shape you – day by day – inch by inch – not into somebody else, but into a first-rate version of yourself. You are not called to be Moses or Paul or St. Francis or Mother Teresa. God has found YOU so that you might be yourself at your best.