

The Absurdity of God's Love

Luke 15:1-10

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost, Series C

Parallel Texts: Matthew 18:12-14

Companion Texts: Exodus 32:7-14, Psalm 51a, First Timothy 1:12-17

Grace, mercy, and peace, from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. (1st Timothy 1:2)

Ah, yes! How many times we have heard our Gospel Lesson today! It is so familiar. In fact, the fifteenth chapter of Luke is probably the best known chapter in the entire Bible. After the first two verses --- which describes the setting in which Jesus was speaking --- the rest of the chapter is made up of three parables. Two of those are contained in today's reading. The third parable is the lesson of the Prodigal Son. All three parables are apparently told sequentially to drive home the same message.

Yet, as many times as we have heard these passages, the message is easy to miss. We get hung up on the mathematics and absurdity of the whole thing, and never get around to understanding it.

To leave 99 sheep to go looking after one lost lamb that has strayed away seems like poor economy. Just one smelly, dumb, 4-legged grass-burner is not that valuable! It is absurd that anybody would do such a thing!

And why go to all that trouble for just one coin? A drachma --- or denarius to the Romans --- was worth about 16¢. Why get so upset? It's absurd to tear up the whole house for so little.

The sheep is just one out of 100. The coin is just one out of 10. By any logical mathematical formula, there's just not that much comparative value in the lost subject. Why the fuss? And why all the partying when they're found? (Granted, some people will use any excuse to throw a party, but this is a little over the top!)

....And so our thinking goes. We bounce from one logical economic formula to another --- and never get to the heart of the matter.

These parables spoken by Jesus were sparked by a situation that was becoming all too common. Gathered around the Messiah were the outcasts, reprobates, bad characters, and all-around ne'er -do-wells of the area. They were attracted to Him.

As this low class of people drew nearer, another class of people stood back and found fault. Jesus was under heavy fire from the religious leaders --- those who considered themselves members of God's elect --- those who considered themselves graciously chosen to be a light to the world --- those concerned that the distinctiveness of the Jewish way of life not be lost.

Association --- particularly at meals --- with those whose lives demonstrated little more than contempt for God's Law might seem to imply approval of such disregard for the Law. Without some witnesses to the distinctive way of life revealed in the Torah, Judaism would disappear. These self-righteous Pharisees had to appear holy and sacred!

To these religious people, the actions of Jesus were most scandalous. A "religious" Jew choosing to associate with scum? Absurd! That would deny the importance of the whole Jewish way of life --- it would deny election itself!

These men were scandalized because Jesus did not treat the sinners as they did. In their self-declared holiness, they kept their hands clean of any and all open sinners, and then clashed with Jesus on that point. It was terrible to associate with such people. It was unspeakably horrible to eat with them!

Now get the picture: Jesus is the center of attention. The local outcasts were gathered around Him. The Jewish leaders --- observing from the outer perimeter of the group --- grumbling and muttering. As Jesus speaks, He addresses these Pharisees at the outer edge of the crowd, while looking at the lost souls close around him.

“Imagine,” Jesus says, “a shepherd tending a hundred sheep in some hill pasture when --- as he counts them one evening --- finds that one is missing. Nibbling its way from one green tuft to another, the animal has wandered. It is lost and likely to perish. At once the shepherd acts as any true shepherd would. Leaving the rest of his flock in the care of a fellow shepherd, off he goes in search of the lost sheep until he finds it. Picture his joy as he lifts it on his shoulders and goes back to call his friends together.”

The parable is simplicity itself. Although we might not think the effort worthwhile, to a people whose heritage and economy were centered around shepherding, there was an immediate recognition of expected action. Although tending sheep was a humble profession, everybody understood the shepherd’s mindset. A true shepherd recognized each and every sheep in his fold, and every sheep recognized the shepherd. Jesus’ audience understood perfectly the motivation of the shepherd who went looking for the lost sheep.

The Scribes and Pharisees got the message, too. They understood that Jesus was telling them to do the same thing that He was doing --- identifying lost sheep with lost souls. If a Pharisee would do that for a lost sheep, shall Jesus not do at least that much for a lost human being? The skeptics and critics who objected to God’s ways must approve them in spite of themselves.

And so Jesus DECLARES that there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous people who need no repentance.

Jesus now has added a touch of sarcasm: “...righteous people who need no repentance.” Absurd! Even these Pharisees knew that everyone needs repentance. Our sins are forgiven richly and daily --- because of constant repentance. The remark should hit home. These Pharisees were self-righteous. These Pharisees were justifying themselves. In His reference to heaven, Jesus actually excluded them!

The outcasts gathered around Jesus heard a different message in His words. These lost souls heard that the seeking and finding is done by the shepherd Jesus. His receiving and eating with sinners --- His great shepherding work --- was bringing poor sinners to permanent repentance.

Jesus continues: “Or think of a humble housewife who loses --- probably in the straw of a dark corner of her windowless room --- a silver coin. At once she lights a lamp, and with her twig-broom, sweeps every nook and cranny until at last the twinkle of the coin on the stone floor signals the end of her search.”

Oh, yes! The people understood the importance of a lost drachma! Although its value translates into about 16¢ today, in those days it was one day’s wage for a common laborer. Yes, even the critics would have to nod their heads in agreement that --- indeed --- a tireless search would indeed be called for. And, yes, a celebration would be in order when it was found.

Now --- once again --- Jesus declares that there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. The joy in heaven is contrasted with the murmuring of the Pharisees and Scribes.

Jesus’ mission was to the last, the least, and the lost. He was not trying to break down a way of life. He was bringing members back into the fold who belong there. The desperate need is still there, however: REPENT.

Our God goes after the lost (even today)! These self-righteous Pharisees were not willing to risk the “peace, unity, and purity” of the cult by reaching out to those they considered sinners --- but Jesus was. Jesus loves sinners. It’s the sin He hates.

Perhaps it’s time for us to dare to mimic the absurd love of God. We’ve seen too many sheep overlooked by our churches --- sheep that end up lost. If we are to do God’s love, we must move out into a risky --- sometimes corrupting --- world, chasing the lost. Love cannot live if penned up in stained-glass monuments. Love must pursue the lost in the lost world.

Where do you find yourself in the mental picture painted by today’s Gospel Lesson? Are you standing back, chin in hand, shaking your head at the low-life types around you? Are you standing with the Pharisees and Scribes passing judgment on those whom God has gathered as His people?

Or are you painfully aware that your own lost condition demanded justice from the very God against whom you have rebelled? Do you recognize that Jesus Christ has paid the penalty for your rebellion, and you have been declared right before God?

Can you recognize yourself in that lost sheep or that lost coin? Can you rejoice in knowing that Jesus Christ searched for you while you were lost because He loves you?

It is so reassuring to know that Jesus searched for each of us while we were still in our lost and sinful condition. When He found us, there was much rejoicing in Heaven. It is just as reassuring to know that we are not expected to be perfect. The church is a place for sinners. None of us are saints. Jesus calls us to repentance as we grow in His strength and grace.

Amen. May the peace of God, which passes all [human] understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen (Philippians 4:7)