

Third Sunday after Trinity: Luke 15:1–10

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This morning's Gospel text is Luke chapter 15, and that means you get to hear my triennial rant over the lectionary and the beady little minds who produce them. The reading should have been the entire chapter not two-thirds of it. "Jesus told them this parable." This parable. Singular. A three-parter consisting of a) a lost sheep, b) a lost coin, and c) a lost son. The first two set up the third, which is the clincher and the point of the whole thing. But someone apparently thought that we don't have the time or attention span for a whole chapter of Holy Scripture and so we get only the first two parts – lost sheep and lost coin. Lost sons will have to wait for another time, I guess. It's like telling two thirds of a joke and making you wait a couple of years for the punch line.

Jesus is looking at the religious types when He tells this parable. The Pharisees and the scribes. The blue chip, A-list, religious folks who, like so many religious types, spent much of their religious time and energy judging and criticizing others who didn't rise to their standards of religiosity. At issue was the company that Jesus kept. "This man receives sinners and eats with them." That alone was reason enough to write Jesus off. What kind of respectable Messiah/Savior hangs with tax collectors and "sinners"?

Of course, you might as well ask, "What kind of doctor hangs out with sick people?" It's not the healthy who need a physician but the sick, Jesus said on a similar occasion. How would you like it if you came into your doctor's office with the flu or a cold and he immediately takes one look at you, covers his face, and runs out the exam room door? Doctors hang with sick people. Saviors hang with people who need to be saved. Jesus came to save sinners. The self-righteous have no need for Jesus or His salvation. They're fine, or so they think. They're walking the walk and talking the talk and judging the world around them. What on earth do they need a Savior for or from?

"This man receives sinners and eats with them." Be glad He does. That means He receives you and eats with you too. A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned that it's become fashionable in some circles to say that Christians aren't sinners anymore, and that they shouldn't call

themselves sinners. Some would say it's wrong, if not downright heresy, to say "I, a poor miserable sinner." They would say, "That's what you were, not what you are. You're a saint not a sinner. Don't talk like that! Think positively and you'll act positively. Call yourself a loser and you'll lose. Call yourself a winner and you'll win."

Then along comes St. Paul, the apostle Paul. "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost."

That's right. No less than the apostle Paul declares in words written down for us and for our learning that he is the chief of sinners. The biggest loser in the game of religion. In his letter, Paul called his entire religious past a "bunch of crap" (skubala for those of you keeping score in Greek) in view of the excellency of knowing Jesus Christ and being found in Him, "not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ."

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. That simple message needs to be repeated over and over like some punch line the world and all its dour religions don't get. Jesus is the Savior of sinners. He's the Redeemer of the unredeemable, the Justifier of those who don't have a case. He's the Finder of the lost, the One who seeks losers in their lostness and raises the undeserving dead from their grave.

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? Now I'm a city kid, and know nothing at all about sheep and shepherding other than I like lamb chops, but my answer to that question is "Are you crazy?" Who in their right minds leaves ninety-nine valuable sheep to fend for themselves in a wilderness full of wolves to go chasing after one sheep that doesn't have the good sense to stick to the flock? This is just bad stewardship of energy and time, if you ask me. Write that lost sheep off as the dead asset it already is and go on with business.

Even more outrageous, when the shepherd finds this lost sheep he's been searching for, he gives it a free ride home on his shoulders, invites his friends and neighbors over, and throws a party for the lost sheep that was found. Now the text doesn't mention this, but there's no such thing as a party without a BBQ, so something got roasted and it wasn't the sheep that was lost. And if you don't think that is simply outrageous, you haven't gotten the Gospel punch line. Here it is:

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.

There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who recognizes his sinfulness and says, “I, a poor miserable sinner” than over ninety-nine self-justified righteous religious folks who need no repentance. More joy in heaven over someone who simply says, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner” than over ninety-nine teetotaling, morally upright, society transformers who need no repentance. More joy.

Let me tell you another joke. See if you get this one. A woman has ten silver coins. She loses one. She turns the whole house upside down looking for it. Sweeps the floor, turns out the cushions in the couch, moves all the tables and chairs. Spends a whole day and more seeking and searching. And when she finds it, she calls together all her friends and neighbors and throws a party and spends a lot more than that coin was ever worth not counting all the time she took to look for it.

That’s insane, isn’t it? Nobody would do that. Oh, maybe they’d look for the coin. It was fairly valuable. A drachma, the price of one sheep. (HMMMM. One sheep. That’s interesting.)

There’s joy in finding what was lost. “Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” That’s outrageous. Joy in heaven over one sinner who simply comes to the recognition that he cannot save himself and trusts Christ to save him. One sinner who repents, who comes to a new mind about himself and Christ, causes a burst of joy before the angels. And it’s not even something he does. He’s the lost sheep, he’s the lost coin. The seeking and finding happen to him. And his being found is cause for joy and celebration. And a party!

And then comes the big joke, the one you didn’t get to hear this morning, about the son who told his father to drop dead, took his inheritance, wasted it, and came back home to the forgiving arms of his father who was so overjoyed that his son was back safe and sound, he killed a calf and threw a party and invited everyone, including his older brother who refused to embrace the outrage of grace that justifies sinners. And we’re left wondering at the end, will he get it? Will he join the party? Will he see himself in the same light in which he judges his brother? Will he laugh at the seeking, searching grace of God who dies for His enemies, who justifies us while we were yet sinners, who sought us before we knew we were lost, who found us in our death and raised us to life while we were dead.

Will we get it? Will we see ourselves in the same way Paul saw himself? The Law of God demands it and reflects it back into your face. You are that chief of sinners. You are that wayward, wandering sheep. You are that hopelessly lost coin that can't find itself. You are the cause of joy in heaven, the joy that caused Christ to endure the cross and scorn its shame. You were lost in Sin and Death and Christ went out and sought you in the wilderness of your Sin. He found you in the darkness of His death. He put you on His shoulders and lifted you up in Him from the depths of the grave to the highest heavens at the Father's right hand. He searched for you, and was restless until He found you in the water of your Baptism. And there was rejoicing that day, rejoicing with the angels and the whole company of heaven who sang their Alleluias to the Lord when you were baptized.

There is much talk today about joy or the lack of it. Churches have become joyless places, burdensome, wearisome, more like a pep rally for sales people than a gathering of sinners, a celebration of the winners instead of a party of losers. The reason the churches have lost their joy is that they've lost the punch line. They've forgotten the joke or they no longer think it's funny. They're so busy transforming society and being the world's moral nanny that they miss the point: that Christ Jesus came to this world to save sinners of whom I and each one of you are foremost.

Jesus told them this parable because they grumbled at the company He kept. They should have been relieved, grateful, even giddy at the great good news that He received tax collectors and sinners and ate with them. That meant there was room at His table for them. And for you. Get it?

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Luke 15:1-10 / 15 September 2013", posted 2013-09-15 (<https://htlcms.org/2013/09/luke-151-10-15-september-2013/>).