

September 15, 2013
Pentecost 17

"Jesus' Love for the Lost"

LUKE 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "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? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ 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. ⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The Pharisees and teachers of the law "muttered" because Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. What comes to your mind when you hear this word "mutter?" Do you not think of someone growling and grumbling under their breath? When people mutter they may hold their hand over their mouth as they are saying bad things about someone. The religious leaders could not say enough bad about Jesus. They trash talked Jesus for sitting down and eating with sinners and welcoming them into his life.

What always impresses us about Jesus is the love he had for all people. Jesus cared deeply about the repentant sinners who come to him for forgiveness. He also cared deeply about the ultra religious self-righteous people who thought they were so good that they did not need the forgiveness Jesus offered. He wanted them to see how lost they were and how much he wanted to rescue them. So Jesus tells three powerful and poignant stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son to show his love for the lost and for us.

The lost sheep

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them." No matter how carefully the shepherd watches the sheep he will experience moments when one of the sheep gets lost. Sheep love to wander. They seem to have no sense of danger as they keep nibbling on grass and jumping down on rocks until they find themselves on a ledge where they cannot go up or down. They call out for help with their plaintive cries of Baa-Baa-Baa. The wild animals hear their cries and come running for an easy dinner.

A few years ago, several sheep became stranded on a steep cliff right next to Highway 166. Without someone to rescue them from the steep cliff, they were destined to perish. The Santa Maria even carried a picture of the sheep that were destined to die because the cliff was too steep for anyone to rescue them.

Jesus wanted these self-righteous, religious people to realize how lost they were without him. Jesus wants us to examine our lives to realize just how lost we were before he rescued us. This past week we had a lesson with the children at the Transitional Shelter. The lesson was about Adam and Eve falling into sin. Look at their lives after they disobeyed God. Immediately they started blaming each other. They foolishly tried to hide from God. They knew that they had to die and be eternally separated from God. They pass this sin down to their children. Cain kills his brother Abel.

Adam's sin has been passed down to you. No one had to teach you how to be naughty when you were a little child. Your parents did not have to send you to naughty school, or read books about children being naughty so you could learn how to be naughty. You picked it up on your own from the sinful flesh you inherited from your parents. We call this original sin. It shows itself in the terrorists who put together bombs with nails and ball bearings to hurt as many people as possible when the bomb goes off. It shows itself in the schools of our land where children are mean to other children. It shows itself in the anger that you see in your own heart, the selfishness, the pride, the lack of caring for others as we should. This lost condition also shows itself in the way we foolishly think we can atone or make up for our sin by our failed attempts to show kindness and love and earn God's favor. The words of Isaiah apply to each of us here today. "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way."

Daniel Blair was four years old. His parents had given him a Cocker Spaniel puppy. They enjoyed playing together in the back yard. The puppy got in the mud so Daniel decided to give him a bath in the toilet so he would not get the house dirty. He started washing his dog, and then decided to flush the toilet so the swirling water would wash him clean. When he flushed, the puppy was swept away. He took a ride through the plumbing and ended up stuck in a waste pipe in the front of the home. It took four hours of digging up the pipe to rescue the puppy that was lost. As I write these words the news carries the report of two hikers who are stranded and lost after climbing Long's Peak in Colorado. Can they survive the snow on the peak and deluge of rain that has fallen making trails slippery and dangerous?

The search

When someone is lost, search and rescue teams will risk their lives to rescue the lost. So the shepherd searches diligently for the sheep that was lost. Jesus says, "Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?" I can just hear the people who were familiar with tending sheep saying, "No, he would not! There is no way any shepherd would leave the ninety-nine alone and go after one sheep until he finds it. That makes no sense whatsoever. Any shepherd with even a little common sense knows that leaving the ninety-nine will risk others wandering off. How long will it take the wolves and lions to find the sheep and go on a major killing spree? This often happens when sheep are left alone and neglected.

What impresses us in this story is the intensity of the search. The shepherd will do everything to search for that lost sheep. The woman who lost her coin does not wait for the next day to search for the coin. It may be dark, but that does not stop her from lighting a lamp and "searching carefully until she finds it."

Jesus diligently searched for people who were lost and brought them into his kingdom. He stopped beneath a sycamore tree where Zacchaeus was trying to get a better view. Joyfully Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." Later Jesus summed up his mission in life with these words, "For the Son of Man is come to seek and save what was lost."

Today you are sitting here as someone who shares something special with your brothers and sisters in Christ. You know what is like to be trapped by sin and how amazing it is that Jesus cared enough about you to come and rescue you. If you were the only person in the world who had ever sinned, you know Jesus would have come down to this earth, gave his life for you, and brought you to believe in him. That's the love he has for people.

Here is what the Lord tells us in Ezekiel 34. "I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a a day of clouds and darkness. ...I will search for the lost and bring back the strays."

So the search continues today. Lost people who know about Jesus as the one true shepherd eagerly desire to bring other people know him as their Shepherd. Jesus has a plan for your life and for mine. He calls us to be his rescue team, his search and rescue team. What is my purpose in life? Why does the Lord still allow this world to exist? Why does he give me another week of life on this earth? Our purpose in life is carrying out Jesus' work of seeking and saving the lost. There is no greater honor and privilege than being part of this search and rescue operation.

The shepherd

Now we look at the shepherd as he is described by Jesus. "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.'" The shepherd does not tie a rope around the neck of the sheep and drag it along. He does not hope the sheep that he rescues will follow him home. No, the shepherd puts the sheep on his shoulders and carries it home. He joyfully puts the sheep on his shoulders.

Please, I ask of you this morning. I plead with you. Look at the Shepherd who has rescued you. What do you see on his face? You see nothing but pure joy. The Books of Hebrews even tells us that Jesus had joy as he went to the painful suffering on the cross. "For the joy set before he endured the cross and the shame." Jesus is the Christ. He is the Messiah. The Messiah speaks in Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor and bind up the broken hearted." A few years ago in our Bible camp we took a picture of Jesus carrying the Sheep and put it onto a board that we distressed by pounding it with rocks and burning it with a blow torch to show what Jesus went through to rescue us. He puts us on his shoulders. He does it all for us.

Jesus tells us that there is great joy among the angels of heaven over one sinner that repents. The shepherd finds joy in bringing home the sheep and sharing the good news with his friends and family. The woman finds joy in recovering her lost coin and sharing

the good news with friends and family. Jesus tells us, "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents." Angels are so happy that you are here this morning because you were once lost but now you are found. You were once blind but now you see. If angels could be envious, they would envy your privilege of being on Jesus' search and rescue team.

The pruned faced Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered when they saw the smiles on the face of the sinners who were Jesus and the smile on the face of Jesus. Look at the person sitting next to you. See the smiles on their faces as they look at the smile on the face of their Shepherd who has rescued them. Look at the smile on the face of your Shepherd as he joyfully carries you home. Amen.