


“Already Found”

Sunday, September 11, 2016

17th Sunday after Pentecost

 **(Luke 15:1-10, NRSV)**

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, *“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*

So he told them this parable:

“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?

When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And 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.’*

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.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

“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?

When 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.’*

Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

[2nd Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

These two parables speak about the character of God.

We see God as the Divine Seeker who celebrates every individual who is found.

We hear the promise that God cares for each one and that none is insignificant.

We notice that neither the coin nor the sheep play a part here; it is **God** who is actively seeking.

In some ways these parables speak to us in terms of the great gift we've been given as believers who have been found.

In another way, however, Jesus is speaking to those *“already found”* who don't seem to understand what it means to seek and save the lost.

Let us pray...Lord, we come to your Word today asking that you would take away the familiarity of these stories and help us engage them with fresh eyes. Help us to understand what you are doing as you seek each one of us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

So, let's begin by considering this idea that Jesus might be directing these stories toward the Scribes and the Pharisees.

We might think of these religious leaders as the *“already found”*.

It is their grumbling, after all, that motivates Jesus to tell these two stories.

They are unhappy because Jesus “*welcomes sinners and eats with them*”.

They are uncomfortable with the radical hospitality that Jesus demonstrates.

It is helpful for us to remember who these guys are.

Renowned theologian N.T. Wright offers this understanding of who the Pharisees really were within their own context:

“The Pharisee was passionately concerned about the ancestral traditions, particularly the law of Moses and the development of that into the oral law, and about the importance of keeping this double Torah not simply because it was required, or in order to earn the divine favor, but because a renewed keeping of the law with all one’s heart and soul was...what constituted the appropriate and faithful response to the faithfulness of Israel’s God...The Pharisaic worldview was about the whole business

of...being *Jewish* human;...of living *with wisdom, integrity and hope* in a threatened Jewish community; of living with *zeal for Torah, the covenant and above all Israel's faithful God* within a threatened Jewish community.” (Wright, N.T., *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, page 195-96).

The Pharisees were the ones who were intimately acquainted with the rules; the ones who drew the boundaries; the ones who enforced the holiness codes of clean and unclean.

We have become accustomed to hearing the word “*Pharisee*” as a term of derision and contempt.

That was not the perspective of 1st Century Jews.

Certainly there was some resentment of this elite class who lived high off the Temple Tax and the sacrifice of others.

But, they represented the historical authority on God's Law that had governed Jewish culture for centuries.

For Jesus to ridicule and criticize the Scribes and the Pharisees was shocking for the people; it was hard to hear.

So what was going on here as Jesus continued to call-out the religious leaders?

Furthermore, who are we in these stories?

This is where Jesus steps on our toes too and challenges us to listen carefully.

These stories are not only about God seeking to bring every lost soul back into his embrace,

They are also bold reminders of the dangers of classifying who's on the inside and who's out.

When Jesus speaks to the **Pharisees** he is talking to the **ultimate insiders**.

He is not condemning them as absolutely evil people; he is trying to get them to see themselves as God sees them and to realize that, for all their piety, they are missing the point.

2,000 years later we – the church – have become the insiders and Jesus may now be asking us to realize that we may be missing the point as well.

We are the “*already found*” but we’re hiding from those on the outside.

What is it that prevents us from engaging in the sort of “*active seeking*” that God shows us in these parables?

What holds us back from engaging those are not yet found?

If we really are the “*already found*” why aren’t we more eager to share?

Maybe it has to do with not quite understanding what the search is **FOR**.

The parables show us searches for something specific: a wandering lamb and a lost coin.

Maybe we need to broaden the scope of the search and who God is looking for.

I believe this may cause the lines to blur between who’s in and who’s out.

There is a sense of joy and celebration when the lost is recovered.

Can we also feel that joy?

Who among us has **not** felt lost, alone, and beyond the reach of God's care?

We have been the one who wandered off or got lost in the shuffle.

These parables remind us of the joy of being "*found*" by the long reach of God's love.

This is the God who travels to find us buried in the thicket and pulls us out to safety.

Here is God who searches in every dark and dirty corner and crawls into the hole you have dug for yourself to drag you back into the light.

Again this week, I want you to notice the dirty hand in our bulletin graphic; this is hard work and God does it willingly, with tender love and care.

If we can see **ourselves** here, then can we also see **others** in these same places and realize the difference between how God "*welcomes*" the

wandering one, while we insiders sometimes pride ourselves on “*saving*” a lost soul.

There is a difference between
“*welcoming*” and “*saving*”.

Sometimes we may be more comfortable with the idea of “saving the lost”.

There is a certain magnanimous quality to this.

It may be easier than “welcoming” those whom we perceive as being lost.

We may subconsciously view these as worthy of saving but not particularly welcome at our supper table.

You see, saving is about power and welcoming is about intimacy; intimacy can be difficult.

Let’s be clear, this does not make us evil, it makes us flawed human beings to whom Jesus speaks a healing word.

All of this helps us to realize that the sinners Jesus brings to the table are both “**the lost**” and the “**already found**”.

The sinners in this story are anyone who needs to repent and that seems to include us.

Jesus picks on the Pharisees because they are the leaders who are supposed to set the example.

In his day Jesus finds these leaders have gotten caught up in the “good life” and have forgotten the *truth* of God’s Law: **LOVE GOD, LOVE OTHERS, CHANGE THE WORLD.**


There are times when we all need our minds changed too.

God rejoices when the insiders – *that’s us* – change their minds about who’s in and who’s out.

Heaven rejoices every time we move the community closer to living like there is no such thing as “the one” or “the ninety-nine”.

There is great celebration whenever we fail to notice “*categories*” or “*classes*” and only see **“God’s people”**.

We cannot see God’s community completely whole until **ALL** are included and none are “*lost*”.

 Friends, I feel very blessed to be counted among the
“already found”.

But I am convicted that this often leads me to forget
where I’ve been, how I got here,
and how easy it is to wander off.

Being already found means that we are blessed to
know that God took the trouble to seek us out
and we are obligated to truly welcome everyone
over whom **God** rejoices.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the
Holy Spirit. **Amen.**