

III Trinity 2021 (June 20, 2021)
Sermon - Saint Joseph Parish
Father Herbert Plimpton
St. Luke 15.1-10



While we must wait for the 9th Sunday after Trinity for the parable of the Prodigal, I can fairly say that, joined with these two parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, we are in the heart of Luke's gospel. To me, nowhere else in the New Testament does God's seeking the lost and God's joy at their finding shine so brightly.

*"Then drew near unto Him all the publicans, or tax collectors, and sinners for to hear Him"...*Hardship had come upon most people in Palestine. Tax collectors, with the possible exception of chiefs like Zaccheus, were not of princely wealth relative to the common people. The common tax collector, took up the tolls and taxes for the Roman authorities, and this they did face to face, hand to hand, with their own Jewish people.

Over time, they had come to be despised by their own. A reputation for dishonesty, deceit, and usury stained their occupation. A branding as traitors in the service of a pagan government and as apostates of Judaism had rendered them despised, ostracized..LOST. So desperate to survive hard times, they succumbed to dishonorable work.

Luke says, "sinners" came with them..How telling! Luke leaves their sins unnamed.. so that we might recognize ourselves in their midst. And now these lost people are drawing near to Jesus. Word has filtered down to them of what Jesus has been doing. There are

reports that Jesus is extending his hand to their like in spite of all that they have done. With hearts sensing acceptance, they have an inkling, perhaps, of impending joy.

Now the Pharisees and scribes murmur and hiss that Jesus not only receives tax collectors and sinners, but eats with them. He does the forbidden for the sake of the despised. These persons who have flocked to Jesus with a hope that is anxious now sit at table with Him.

But now I find myself confronted.. I have to admit that, if I am honest with God and all of you, I would count myself among the Pharisees...Who are the sinners? Can I believe my Savior would turn his merciful eyes upon human traffickers..would he befriend the child molesters?..Would he seek out the fiends who troll the dark web for ransom opportunities? Are such human beings not all to be despised?

But Yes, if the gospel is about God's unexpected transforming love..His will to change MY HEART..I have to say Yes, I believe. While the sins have changed, Jesus' will to find in the end even the sinner most lost has not.

The owner of 100 sheep loses just one of his flock. The lost sheep itself cannot help itself, but his owner searches far and wide until he finds it. He does not cease from seeking out what is precious to him UNTIL the lost creature is found. I am reminded of the gut wrenching emotion I feel when something I treasure is lost. How true it is to earthly

experience that the dearness of something swells within our hearts when it..or he..or she is lost.

Notice the owner does not drive back with a whip the sheep he finds, nor does he expect it to follow him back on its own, nor does he have a hired hand carry it home. Instead, he carries his lost sheep around his own neck. When he brings it home, he rejoices- he cannot contain himself, but calls out to his friends to celebrate with him..for joy is a contagion.

A woman of modest means has ten treasured silver coins. She loses only one of them. The one coin that is lost becomes even more precious than the others simply by virtue of its being lost. She searches about her little home using every means at her disposal to find it until..again searching UNTIL she finds it. And when she does, she rejoices..her joy cannot be contained. She just has to call her friends.

And that word, UNTIL, that suggests “forever” in human terms, is a hint that the eternal is breaking in for the sake of the lost. “Until” unveils God’s ceaseless, relentless and, mind you, unscolding way of seeking out His lost creatures.

And that spontaneous, full-blown rejoicing of both the sheep owner and the woman reminds us not only that joy loves company, but that such earthly joy as we experience also points to the beyond. Luke tells us that all the company of heaven, even the angels in our eternal home, are swept up in God’s joy.

The Pharisees and scribes hearing these two parables must have felt their world turned upside down. Jesus has just revealed that joy in heaven breaks out over one worthless lost creature. My own conviction that the despicable of our own time are not worth God’s time, this gospel passage has overturned.

But, to be clear, this gospel message does not mean that the sheep owner searching for his lost sheep or the woman’s searching for her lost coin represent God. It does, however, represent his action. Jesus employs an argument we find throughout scripture: From the lesser to the greater.

What do I mean?... If a man will go to such lengths to recover one precious sheep, and if a woman will go to such lengths to recover her treasured coin, how much more effort will God spend to recover a lost person.

God’s joy comes from finding and lifting up the lost and those we despise so much they are lost to us. Yet in His joy He seems to transform them and gives them back to us. We do not have to look far in Scripture for us to be able to embrace this truth.

Recall how Jesus finds a despised tax collector named Levi. He calls him to discipleship and he will be changed. Matthew will now be his name. The lost man will become an apostle and saint. We now treasure the gospel attributed to him.

Remember Saul. Prior to Jesus finding him on the road to Damascus, he was among the

despised, for he was the scourge of Christians. He stood by like a devoted valet holding the cloaks of those who stoned Stephen to death. He pleaded with his Jewish authorities not only to be allowed to round up Christians, and to throw them in prison for blasphemy, but to have them executed.

Despised as Saul was by Christians, Jesus finds him on the road..and thereafter he will be called Paul. He will be a saint also, and by way of the epistles he wrote for us, he will give back to the God who found him.

Finally, there is Jesus. So lost to His own people, so despised as to be nailed to a Cross, and so lost as to utter the words of abandonment. BUT so treasured by His Father, as we now are, as to be raised up for all of us to love.

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