

**The Sixth Sunday in Martyrs' Tide, September 11, 2022**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

**Lost, Found, Rejoice!**

Luke 15:1–10

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Eph 1:2*

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**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So He told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, doesn't leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?" (vv 1–4).**

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No one can deny that the Pharisees and scribes are right in what they say about Jesus: **"This man receives sinners and eats with them"** (v 2). That's not gossip or slander. No, it's the honest-to-goodness truth. That's exactly what Jesus does. Guilty as charged. Instead of turning away notorious sinners and law breakers, He welcomes them; rather than shunning tax collectors and other social outcasts, He breaks bread with them. He gives them His friendship. He even calls them to be His disciples. So it's no wonder that **"the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Him"** (v 1). And Jesus does it right out in the open for everyone to see. No attempt to hide what's happening or to put an end to it. He's got no shame. He's not embarrassed by anyone who comes to Him. He's not put off by the reputations and personal histories of those who follow Him.

## 3.

For the Pharisees and scribes, that's the problem with Jesus. He really should be more careful about the company He keeps. It gives the wrong impression. And everyone knows that bad company corrupts good morals. If He keeps going like this, it could get Him into trouble one day. Chances are that He'll end up just like the sinners He befriends.

But that's not all. The Pharisees and scribes are also right about the sinners and tax collectors. It's clear that these people have broken God's law. They've violated His commandments. They've debased themselves by their sin. It's clear that they've lived as if God didn't matter and as if they mattered most. That their love for others has failed.

In the language of the Gospel reading, these sinners have most definitely wandered from the fold and gotten lost. But it's not just that they've chosen a different path for themselves or decided on an alternate lifestyle. Such phrases attempt to make sin okay, as if it's all a matter of personal preference, just individual taste. No, the path of sin leads to destruction. Thus, being lost is like standing on the deck of a sinking ship or getting disoriented on a long hike in a remote area. We know how those stories end. We've heard about such things on the news. In New Testament Greek, just like in English, the word "lost" can have the sense of being lost forever. To perish eternally.

And that makes the problem with Jesus all the worse. What in God's name is He doing in the middle of people who deserve nothing but death and hell?

## 2.

Jesus lets us know what He's doing. He puts it in a way that we can all understand and relate to. He tells stories about a lost sheep and a lost coin.

**"What man of you,"** Jesus asks, **"having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, doesn't leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?"** (v 4). There's part of me that always wonders if it would really be worth the effort to go after the one. To lose one is an economic loss for the shepherd, but he's got ninety-nine more. He could just take the loss and write it off, happy that he's got the others. Yet the way that Jesus puts the question asks for a positive answer. Of course the shepherd would leave the ninety-nine! Whatever we might think, there's no question he would go after that one lost sheep who wandered away. How much more so a good shepherd. Then there are the words that God spoke through the prophet Ezekiel, saying: **"I, I Myself will search for My sheep and will seek them out. . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak"** (Ezek 34:11, 16).

**"Or what woman,"** Jesus asks, **"having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, doesn't light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?"** (v 8). Compared to a sheep, the coin isn't worth that much, but a poor person places great value on even a small sum. At one time or another we've all set life on hold to hunt for an item that someone else would consider worthless. Even if your spouse thinks you're crazy, you don't stop until you've found what you're looking for. If it's the car keys or wallet, the search comes with worry, anxiety, or even panic. And while a sheep might find its way back, a coin can't. It won't end up back in the purse unless someone stumbles across it. Add to that the fact that ordinary houses in Palestine had no windows and the poor woman didn't have the modern blessings of electricity or a

flashlight. Picture her bent over with a broom in one hand and an oil lamp in the other, grubbing around in the dust and the dirt for a coin the size of dime. It's pathetic.

What these parables have in common is dedication to finding what was lost. The shepherd spares no effort over his sheep. The woman is practically on hands and knees looking for that small coin. And neither stops until they've found it. They don't give it a decent shot and call it good, one quick pass through the rough terrain or a swift sweep of the house. Instead, they're totally dedicated to what they're doing. It's a picture of our Lord. That's how dedicated He is in His desire to find one who's lost, to rescue one who's perishing. He's all in. He held nothing back. He stooped down to the lowest place and came into our darkness, so that we could be raised up with Him and live with Him in eternal light. The fact is that Jesus ends up condemned exactly like the sinners He befriends. He identifies so closely with them that He actually bears their sins, dies their death, and suffers their hell on the cross. That's the very reason He receives sinners and eats with them—not to condone their sin but to take it away. He came to find the lost.

1.

But the stories don't end there. Consider the shepherd again. **“And when he has found [the lost sheep], he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there'll be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”** (vv 5–7). The shepherd not only finds the lost sheep, he also brings it home on his shoulders. Our Lord came down from heaven in the incarnation. The cross was literally laid on His shoulders. He died for all. Then He ascended bodily into heaven after His resurrection. He did what no other shepherd could do. And what Jesus has done in rescuing each sinner brings glory to God and joy to heaven, where the lost sheep are finally at home once again.

**“And [the woman,] when she has found [her coin], 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's joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents”** (vv 9–10). We know what it's like to find something that was lost. You can't help but cry out, “I found it!” The entire house, perhaps even the neighborhood, hears about it and shares the joy. Yet the joy that Jesus has isn't over the multitude of the saved. He's not about the numbers. His joy is over each individual sinner who sorrows over his sin and trusts in Him. One sinner who repents sets off a celebration that reaches heaven. And that goes for each of us. You're the one for whom Jesus rejoices, inviting the whole church in heaven and on earth to join Him.

AS A SHEPHERD REJOICES TO FIND HIS LOST SHEEP  
OR A WOMAN HER LOST COIN,  
SO JESUS RECEIVES EVERY REPENTANT SINNER WITH JOY.

St. Paul told Timothy that **“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life”** (1 Tim 1:16–17). Even the chief of sinners, **“a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent”** (1:13) received mercy. When Jesus receives lost sinners and tax collectors—and Luke’s Gospel gives many such examples—He doesn’t condemn them. They were already condemned, and they knew it. Instead, He forgives them. And that’s why these sinners and tax collectors love Jesus, flock to Him, and rejoice to hear His word. He has taken away their sin. Thanks be to God.

Yes, Jesus receives sinners, including Pharisees and scribes. He does it in the same way that a shepherd rescues a lost sheep or a woman recovers a lost coin. He rejoices in each one. He even eats with them. Dear sinner, Christ Jesus came for you. Repent, and rejoice!

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The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

*Phil 4:7*

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*Revised from a sermon preached on September 15, 2013, for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost at St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana.*