

**09/15/19**  
**14<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost**  
**OT: Jer. 4:11-12, 22-28**  
**NT: Luke 15:1-10**

## **Finding the Lost**

God values every human being and we should as well. Regardless of what we have done or haven't done in our lives, God still cares for all of us. Those who are walking in the light need to adopt our Father's attitude toward those who are "throwaway humans". Whether behind bars, among the homeless, in nursing facilities, or rejected by society, God's love never ends for each individual. Jesus associated with those deemed sinners and outcasts. The church must not only welcome those who may benefit the church, but those who need help as well. The Good Shepherd searches the wilderness to find the one who is lost. What are we doing to reach the rejected ones?

In this reading [today](#) Jesus continues to upset the religious leaders who are trying to live good lives and hold others to the same standard of goodness and faithfulness.

Yes, "The Straight and Narrow" is a good thing, if it provides safety and nurtures holiness and goodness. Of course, part of the problem is just how very narrow The Straight and Narrow is, and it's very easy for us to find ourselves falling right off the path and feeling lost and alone, lost and beyond hope.

How then can we feel that we and all of the other sinners, are "of great value" to God?

But we might wonder, is it fair and balanced? After all, the concern of the Pharisees is not necessarily hypocritical and corrupt.

This is where the problem of grace comes in. We really want it for ourselves, but it's a little harder to think that it's freely given to everyone.

Who was most hungry for this all good news all the time- "Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him."

There's more than one way to approach this problem of grace, as there so often is when we read the Bible. One approach is to picture ourselves as the lost coin or the lost sheep. That way feels good, much better than putting ourselves in the place of the religious leaders. Jesus loves me, this I know, and Jesus will come and find me when I wander away like a little lost lamb: perhaps the most comforting image is that famous painting- this lost lamb on the shoulder of the gentle Good Shepherd.

But perhaps this text isn't about putting ourselves in the place of the lost coin or lost sheep but in the role of the one who seeks them. After all, there's no repentance here on the part of the sheep or the coin, but there is plenty of seeking and finding. And there are direct challenges by Jesus to put ourselves in the place of the one who seeks, not the one who is found.

In her sermon, Taylor observes that "the invitation is not about being rescued by Jesus over and over again, but about joining him in rounding up God's herd and recovering God's treasure....It is about trading in our high standards on a strong flashlight and swapping our 'good examples' for a good broom. It is about discovering the joy of finding." These parables, then, are about the shepherds and sweepers--and we're challenged to see ourselves in them (*The Preaching Life*)

This is where so many great writers focus their attention. Charles B. Cousar writes of "God is like that, the stories say, meticulously pursuing confused and rebellious creatures. Such searching gives value to those being sought. They become treasured and significant because they are not left for lost, but are made the objects of divine concern" (*Texts for Preaching Year C*).

One is reminded of Henri Nouwen's claim that "We are not loved because we are precious, but we are precious because we are loved."

Jesus was like this and it's why he sat comfortably at supper with sinners who were hungry for good news. When he did so, he was showing us, not just telling us with words, "acting out God's gracious and determined search for the lost." (Van Harn)

We can conscientiously do the math, Van Harn notes, and argue the reasonableness of the shepherd's leaving the rest of the sheep or worry about the expense of a party over one coin, but we'd be missing the point and the call: "God's unrelenting search provides the true measure of a lost sinner's worth....there is no acceptable margin of loss." We're told not only to sit with sinners and "the lost," but to seek and find and rejoice, too, when they're restored, just as Jesus did and does (*The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*).

Of course all of this bothered the religious leaders greatly, because they too were struggling with that pesky Problem of Grace. A party in heaven over lost people and sinners upset their worldview here on earth, and Cousar notes that it didn't help that Jesus used people from "the underside of society" to teach this disturbing lesson (*Texts for Preaching Year C*).

It's bad enough to be expected to eat with such people, but it's too much to be told to identify with them and perhaps even learn from them.

Who are the people you would rather not "welcome and eat with"? Is it easy to admire Jesus and to identify with his actions, until you think of someone you would not sit down to supper with?

Is it easier, for example, to give money to a hungry person on the street than it is to sit with them while they eat, and talk with them? Is this something we can do [today](#)? What are the pressures and influences that keep us from table fellowship with all of God's children?

Richard Swanson, in his commentary on this text, speaks of "the unstoppable goodness of God" and feels "the bite" of these parables: "These strong little stories require us to think hard about whether we believe any of what we say about grace and forgiveness, and whether it would be a good idea to practice any of what we say we believe." Again, "Grace is a problem, not a simple solution" (*Provoking the Gospel of Luke*).

We as the body of Christ must adapt an attitude of "extravagant hospitality". Far beyond separate tolerance, the church must not only welcome all who enter our doors, but seek out even those who make us uncomfortable. Without giving up our principles, we should follow Christ into the places where the Holy Spirit is working to change lives.

What does our table fellowship look like [today](#)? Are there people who would not be welcome at our table? How does God call us to find joy in one another's company? Reflecting on our celebration of Holy Communion, would you say that we live out the example set by Jesus?

Are we really practicing what we say we believe in the church? The shepherd seeks out the lost sheep, and the woman goes searching, cleaning furiously, looking for the lost coin. God is like that and we as God's people should be as well.

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