

Pentecost 14, September 11, 2022 (Lk 15:1-10; Ex 32:7-14; I Tim 1:12-17)

In today's gospel, the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and complaining about Jesus because he welcomed sinners and ate with them. The Pharisees were the ruling religious class, the defenders of the Law. They wanted to protect their religion from being contaminated by sins. And here was Jesus, a wandering teacher, trying to tell them how to practice their religion!

Many people called Jesus *Rabbi*, which meant *Teacher*—and that's what Jesus was. Even more than he *preached*, Jesus *taught*. He taught his disciples, he taught the crowds that followed him, he taught anyone who would listen. Often he'd end his teaching by saying, **Let anyone with ears to hear listen!** In fact, those are the very words that come right before today's gospel starts:

Let anyone with ears to hear listen! Now 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."

As usual, Jesus was teaching and preaching to those who wanted to *learn*, to *grow* in their faith, to have a closer relationship with *God*. And as usual, the religious leaders didn't want anything to do with a new teaching. They wanted things the way they were.

So Jesus told a parable. Today's a good day to talk about parables, because it's Rally Day, the beginning of Sunday School—and a *parable* is a *teaching story*, a story right out of real life, a story that sounds straightforward at the beginning. But towards the end, it takes a sort of *twist*. It makes you *think*. You can't just *listen* to a parable—it teases your mind and draws you in and makes you wonder how *you* fit into the story.

Jesus actually told *two* parables, identical in form and similar in words. He invited his hearers to think about a shepherd who'd lost *one* sheep. He left 99 others behind in the wilderness while he searched for the lost one, and he *kept* searching *until* he found it. Then he told about a woman who had ten coins, lost one, and searched the whole house until she found it.

Both parables ended in the same way: the *finders* were so deliriously happy, so wild with joy, they called everyone they knew, saying, **Rejoice with me! I've found what was lost!**

Have you ever been really upset when you lost something, and then found it and wanted to celebrate? I had a dog named Molly once who dug under the fence and ran away, and when I finally found her I almost cried for joy. – I had a *sermon* once that my *computer* ate, and when my secretary at Calvary in Green Bay got it back for me, I almost cried for joy!

But the parables of Jesus go *beyond* this kind of happiness. They end with *heavenly* joy! No matter how happy *you* are when you find something that was lost, God will be even **more** happy about **one sinner** who repents.

The Pharisees and the scribes were listening as Jesus told these parables. I can just hear them saying, *how careless of the woman to lose her valuable coin! Or, that dumb sheep shouldn't have wandered off—and why would any shepherd in his right mind leave 99 sheep alone to go looking for one?*

This is where the parables take that *twist*, and tease us into wondering what Jesus *really* meant. Can you see those grumbling, complaining religious leaders as the 99 sheep that were left in the wilderness, or the nine coins that didn't need to be found?

Their faith in their laws and traditions was so strong, they thought they had all the answers. They were so busy grumbling and complaining, they didn't even realize they *needed* rescuing! And so they missed out on all that joy in heaven, because they never saw their need to repent.

Today's gospel tells about a party to end all parties—a party in heaven, filled with joy, because one sinner repented and allowed herself to be found by Jesus. That's what *gospel* is all about! But it doesn't do us any good unless we realize how much we need it.

God has a *passion* for seeking the lost. There's *indescribable joy* in heaven over the salvation of people who—to *us*—may appear to be insignificant or worthless. God will seek long and lovingly until he finds his lost ones. But being found isn't enough. When he finds us, we have to *recognize* him, and *repent* of our straying, before we can receive his freely-given love.

Where are *you* in the parable of the lost sheep? Are you the straying sheep, the shepherd, or one of the 99? . . . Are you one of the righteous ones who need no repentance? Are you a “found” sheep who has repented so that heaven rejoiced greatly? . . . Is there room in the flock for other sinners, repentant or not? Is there room in the world for others who worship in different ways?

In the Christian faith of the 21st century we celebrate the goodness and mercy of God. Like the Pharisees and the scribes, we, too, cling to our traditions, to the comfortable ways we're used to.

We're reluctant to step out of our comfort zone, to make any sort of change—even though our Lord Jesus was all *about* change. But one thing hasn't changed: we still thank God for the gift of forgiveness for our sins! We thank God that he loves us so ferociously he won't let us go, that he'll pursue us if we try to stray.

We thank God that Jesus died for us *while we were still sinners*, before we even knew about repentance. We thank God that he continues to love us as we struggle to know his mind and do his will—trying to love ourselves, so we can then love our *neighbors* as ourselves. **[St. Stephen: We thank God for the blood of Jesus that makes us acceptable as guests at the divine, heavenly celebration.]**

Rejoice and be glad! The amazing *love* of God found you when you were baptized, and won't let you go. The amazing *grace* of God looks for you when you're lost, and begs you to return. And there's amazing *joy* with God and all the angels of heaven whenever you repent.

Thanks be to God!