

REPENTANCE: BEING FOUND

Luke 15:1-10

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

September 15, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The Gospel lesson for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 15, verses 1 through 10. It is on page 740 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us what repentance really is. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 15, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ 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.' ⁷ 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.

⁸ "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ And 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.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

What is repentance? That's definitely a churchy word, and we often hear of the necessity of repentance. All throughout the Scriptures, repentance is linked to eternal life. Without repentance, sinners like you and me will perish for all eternity. So what is repentance?

I'm going to guess that when we hear the word "repentance," we usually think of it as meaning that we turn away from sin. If I am doing something sinful, I stop doing that thing. I turn away from it, and I don't do it anymore. That, I'm guessing, is what we usually think of when we hear the word repentance. But it's a false definition.

That isn't really the way the Bible uses the word. Think about this with me: If that's what repentance means, then salvation would depend on our own efforts of turning away from sin and doing what is right. That is, quite simply, salvation by works. Our eternal salvation would depend on our own efforts. But the Bible clearly teaches that "by grace you have been saved. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). If repentance were us turning away from sin and doing good works, we would all fail and spend eternity in hell.

So what is repentance? Repentance is a turning. It is a turning away from sin. But it isn't really a turning away from sin to good works. Now, don't get me wrong; good works and repentance are definitely related, but quitting sin and doing good works is not repentance.

REPENTANCE: BEING FOUND (Luke 15.1-10)

Repentance is something else. Repentance is a turning away from sin and unbelief to faith in Christ.

Here's the ironic thing about the false definition of repentance: it's unbelief. If we think repentance means quitting our sin and doing what's right, we're really just trusting in our own righteousness. And if we are trusting in our own righteousness, then we are not trusting in Jesus' righteousness, and we are still unbelievers. This false kind of repentance is really just another form of unbelief.

Now this can be really offensive to churchy people like you and me. We look at people who are obviously sinful, and we think to ourselves, *That person needs to repent*. And what do we mean by that? We probably mean that that person needs to get their act together. They need to quit sleeping around, they need to quit using foul language, and they need to be more like us. But that is not repentance. These things could be called "fruits of repentance," but they are not actually repentance. And this is crucial for us to understand, because we have a temptation to be closed toward people who don't demonstrate the fruits of repentance, but Jesus is the exact opposite. Instead of being closed to sinners, Jesus is chasing them down. And that, really, is repentance. Repentance is Jesus searching for and finding sinners. That includes the openly sinful, who do not seem very churchy, and it includes the self-righteous, who seem very churchy.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables to teach us what repentance is: "The Parable of the Lost Sheep," "The Parable of the Lost Coin," and "The Parable of the Lost Son"—which is often called "The Parable of the *Prodigal* Son." But "The Parable of the *Lost* Son," or even "The Parable of the *Two* Lost Sons," would be a better title. We heard that parable in Lent. So today we consider the first two of these parables: "The Parable of the Lost Sheep" and "The Parable of the Lost Coin."

The text starts out with tax collectors and sinners drawing near to Jesus. And apparently Jesus welcomed them and even ate with them.

This was a big deal—especially the eating with them. In many cultures—and especially in ancient Israel—eating with someone was a big deal. It meant acceptance. It meant you saw someone as something of an equal. Even in our country, it wasn't that long ago, where in some places, while it may have been acceptable to have a black person as a friend, if you ate a meal with him, well, that would have been a scandal. Sadly, this might still be true in some parts of our country.

I can't quite explain why eating together is such a big deal, but there's something about it that many different cultures have picked up on. There's something about it that's a sign of acceptance or equality. It's almost like welcoming someone into your family.

So the Pharisees and scribes grumbled when they saw Jesus welcome tax collectors and sinners and even eat with them.

Now, sinners—you all know what sinners are. And we can all probably think of certain types of sinners we don't want to be friends with. But tax collectors—they were like a special class of sinners. Today, tax collectors in our country might not get a lot of respect, even though they are performing a legitimate vocation, but in ancient Israel, they were absolutely despised. Jewish tax were the worst. They were traitors, because they weren't collecting taxes for Israel. They were collecting taxes for the oppressive Roman Empire. This went way beyond taxation without representation. To collect taxes for Rome was the least patriotic thing a person could do.

REPENTANCE: BEING FOUND (Luke 15.1-10)

So the Pharisees and scribes were scandalized when they saw Jesus welcoming tax collectors and sinners and eating with them. These were people who—by their own actions—excluded themselves from the temple and all the religious activities of Israel. These were the type of people you would expect to suddenly catch on fire if they ever darkened the door of the synagogue. These were bad people, and nobody was denying that. Not even Jesus denied that.

So the Pharisees and scribes were scandalized when they saw Jesus welcoming these bad people and eating with them. They saw Jesus—whom they considered to be a good teacher—perhaps even one of their own—they saw Jesus welcoming these people, and they were scandalized. They couldn't believe it. They thought to themselves, *Come on Jesus! What are you doing? These people need to repent! Don't you know that?*

And, of course, Jesus did know that. Jesus knew these were bad people. He knew they needed to repent. And that is exactly why he treated them the way he did. That is why he welcomed them. That is why he ate with them.

Both Jesus and the Pharisees agreed that these bad people needed to repent. But they had different definitions of repentance, and that is the key difference. Everyone agreed these bad people needed repentance, but Jesus had a different definition of repentance.

So Jesus told these parables to teach repentance.

The first is “The Parable of the Lost Sheep.” A man has a hundred sheep—which was a lot back then. A typical shepherd probably had about fifteen. So anyone with a hundred sheep would also have a few hired hands to help with all the work.

So the shepherd would lead the sheep around from field to field. And especially if he had a lot of sheep, like a hundred, he wouldn't let the sheep stay in one place too long, because they would eat all the grass and then have nothing and panic.

So apparently, as they were moving from field to field, one of the sheep didn't hear the shepherd's call to keep going, or he wandered too far away, and he got lost.

Then the time comes for the shepherd to stop and count his sheep. And he manages to do it without falling asleep. And, behold, there are only ninety-nine! One is lost. He has to go find it. That is what any good shepherd would do. So he leaves the ninety-nine in the open country and searches for the one.

But he's not abandoning the ninety-nine. Remember, if he has a hundred sheep, he would also have hired hands, and all of Jesus' listeners knew this. So the shepherd does not abandon the ninety-nine, but he leaves them with the hired hands, and he goes searching for the one lost sheep.

This is what he has to do, because sheep don't find their way home. When they get lost, they panic and hunker down. Even when they hear the shepherd getting close and calling to them, they are so afraid they still won't move. This is why the shepherd has to carry the sheep home. Even after the sheep is found, it still won't walk until it gets home and starts to feel safe again.

So the shepherd has to go looking for the sheep. And when the shepherd finds the sheep, he has to carry this burden all the way home. This is a heavy burden, and it might be a long walk home, but the shepherd rejoices to do it.

And this, of course, dear lost sheep, is a picture of your Jesus. This is a picture of the cross, where Jesus joyfully bore the burden of your sin. We are the lost sheep, and Jesus is the Good Shepherd, “Who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Heb. 12:2). Just as the

REPENTANCE: BEING FOUND (Luke 15.1-10)

shepherd in the parable bears the burden for the sheep getting lost, so the Good Shepherd bears the burden of rescuing his lost sheep.

And then notice what happens when he gets the sheep home. “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’ ” (15:6).

There’s a little bit of dry humor here, because the shepherd left home with a hundred sheep, and now his friends and neighbors see him coming home with just one, and the shepherd wants to have a party. We don’t hear anything else about the ninety-nine. Remember, the shepherd left them in the open field, and we are left wondering about them. Will the hired hands get them home without losing any more? Probably, but that’s not the shepherd’s concern right now. The lost sheep actually makes it home before the ninety-nine, because the shepherd carried it home. We don’t know what happened to the rest, but heaven rejoices over one sinner who repents.

So Jesus tells this parable *for* the lost tax collectors and sinners and *against* the hypocritical Pharisees and scribes. They are the ninety-nine so-called “righteous persons” who think they need no repentance. Jesus tells this parable against the ninety-nine to teach them that these lost tax collectors and sinners make it home first. They come into the Kingdom of God before the Pharisees and scribes, because they repented. Jesus says, “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents” (15:7).

Repentance is the key teaching of this parable. So pay attention to this part of the gospel lesson: Jesus compares a sinner who repents to a sheep that gets lost and found. This is how Jesus defines repentance.

So look back at the parable again, and ask yourself: *What did the lost sheep do?* What was the lost sheep’s part in repentance? All the lost sheep did was get lost. All he did was get lost. Who discovered he was missing? The shepherd did. And who found whom? Did the sheep find his own way back home? No. The shepherd found the sheep. And what happened when the shepherd found the sheep? Did the sheep follow him home? No. The shepherd picked up this lost and frightened and helpless sheep and carried it home. The repentance of the sheep was all the work of the shepherd.

And the same thing happens in the parable of the lost coin. The coin does not get itself found. That would be ridiculous! The coin gets found. And that is repentance.

It’s not like the lost coin decided to just pop up out of whatever crack in the floor it fallen into and polish itself off so the woman would notice it. It’s not like the woman said, “O good for you lost coin, you found your way back to the other nine.”

And it’s not like the shepherd takes the ninety-nine sheep home, and then in the evening the lost one comes walking back and knocks on the gate. “Ba-a-a. Let me in.” The shepherd does throw a party because the lost sheep found his way home. No. The shepherd throws a party because he went out to find the lost sheep, and he succeeded. The party is for the shepherd. When a sinner repents, heaven rejoices over what Jesus did, while lost sinners get the credit. This is salvation: lost sinners getting the credit for what Jesus did.

And that is repentance. Jesus defines repentance as him finding you. The only part we play in our repentance is the getting lost part. The finding part is all Jesus. The only thing we contribute to our repentance is our sin, and that’s not the good part. Repentance is a matter of you being lost, Jesus finding you in your lost condition, and Jesus bearing your burden of sin on the cross joyfully, because that is how he rescues his lost sheep.

REPENTANCE: BEING FOUND (Luke 15.1-10)

So when it comes to the tax collectors and sinners, Jesus agreed with the Pharisees and scribes. They all agreed that these awful people needed repentance. But they disagreed on what repentance is.

The Pharisees and scribes thought it meant turning away from sin and doing good works. *Straighten up; do what you're supposed to; be more like me; get yourself right with God.*

But how do I do that?

This is an easy thing for a hypocrite to say, because the hypocrite really does think he has gotten himself right with God. But this is a hard thing for the sinner to hear, because the sinner has better theology than the hypocrite. The sinner knows who he is, and the sinner knows he can't get himself right with God. He's probably tried before ... and failed.

The hypocrite has also tried to get himself right with God. And he—like the sinner—has also failed. The difference is that the hypocrite lied to himself and told himself that he did get right with God, when he really didn't.

Repentance is not your own doing. You can't get yourself found. This has to be the work of Jesus. And this is the work of Jesus. And this is good. Whether it is the Pharisees and scribes, or the tax collectors and sinners, or whatever sinners you don't want to be friends with, or you and me, repentance is the work of Jesus. And this is good, because this is the only way repentance will ever happen.

It is Jesus—the Good Shepherd—who searches for his dear sheep, finds us lost in our sin, and bears that burden of sin on the cross with joy, so that he might carry us home to live with him in his Kingdom forever.

That is repentance. **“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”** (Luke 19:10). Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.