

THE ANGELS' JOY

Luke 15:1-10

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

September 11, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 15, verses 1 through 10. 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.

Imagine heaven and earth as a big stadium. Now this isn't a perfect illustration, and this is not how heaven and earth really are, but this might help us understand, just a little bit, what Jesus is talking about in these two parables. Imagine heaven and earth as a stadium. The seating all around the field is heaven. And the seats are packed with angels. It's a sellout crowd. The field is earth. And on the earth, Jesus is playing hide-and-seek. Now, Jesus is always the seeker. He never hides from us, because he does not want to be distant from us. And we are never the seekers. "No one seeks for God" (Ps. 14:2; 53:2; Rom. 3:11). The Bible is quite clear about this. We never seek for God. We might think we do, but it is never really the true God we seek for. We often seek for false gods. That is our sinful nature. But we never seek for the true God. Often times, as we think we are seeking for God, we are actually seeking after false gods and getting lost. So in this game of hide-and-seek, Jesus is always the seeker, and we are always the hiders. And we win, not when we successfully hide from Jesus, but when we are found by him. When Jesus wins, we win. It's not really so much of a game as it is a rescue operation. The angels are the fans in the stands. And they shout for joy every time Jesus finds a lost sinner.

Now this isn't like an ordinary game where you win by getting the most points. So the angels do not cheer as if each lost sinner is just one more point on the way to Jesus' victory. No. The

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angels shout for joy, because each lost sinner whom Jesus finds is a victory. And it's not a minor victory either. Each lost sinner whom Jesus finds is a major victory. And the angels rejoice. Notice what Jesus says in this passage: **"There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance"** (15:7). Again, he says, **"There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents"** (15:10). That is, they rejoice every time Jesus wins hide-and-seek.

And Jesus rejoices too. This is his great joy. He's the one who invites the angels to rejoice with him when he finds a lost sinner. This is the joy of heaven. Every lost sinner who is found by Jesus causes heaven to rejoice.

We rejoice too when we find things that are lost. Nobody rejoices when their car keys are exactly where they remember leaving them. But when they are lost, and then you find them, you rejoice. Or have you ever lost something for so long that you thought it was gone forever? I had a set of hex-key sockets that I lost for about a year. Eventually I started to accept that they were gone forever. Maybe someone borrowed them and didn't give them back. Maybe I accidentally threw them away. But then I found them in one of the several logical places for them to be. I was quite happy. It was like getting a free socket set. I did not, however, throw a party. That would have been kind of weird.

That's one of the weird things about these parables. If a shepherd finds a lost sheep, does he really throw a party? I don't know any shepherds, but I have known some cattle ranchers. And every so often I hear about somebody's cows getting out. But I have never heard of a rancher throwing an "I got my cows back" party. It would be even weirder to do it for one cow. And I've never heard of a woman throwing an "I found my lost coin" party.

I lost my paycheck one time. This was before the days of direct deposit, so my paycheck was an actual check. This was during my poor college years. I worked in a warehouse and it fell out of my pocket. I looked all over the place, and I couldn't find it. One of my coworkers kept quoting a verse from Colossians to me: "Set your mind on things above" (Col. 3:2). It means, "Don't be so concerned about earthly things." I said to him, "I know, but I still need my paycheck." But he kept saying, "Set your mind on things above." Eventually I gave up, and I said I was going to go talk to HR. That's when my coworker stopped me and confessed that he had picked it up and hung it from the ceiling. I was happy to get my paycheck back, but I did not throw a party. If anything, I kind of wanted to punch the guy.

Here's the point: We're happy when we find something that was lost. We might even rejoice. But we don't actually throw parties. But in both of these parables, Jesus talks as if it's a given that the shepherd will throw a party for his lost sheep, and the woman will throw a party for her lost coin. But in our world, it's not a given. If someone threw a party for a lost sheep, we'd say, "What's the big deal? You have ninety-nine other sheep." And if a woman threw a party for a lost coin, we'd say, "So what? You still had nine other coins. And how much did this party cost you, anyway? Does that lost coin even cover the party?"

But Jesus talks as if everyone in their right mind would throw a party. That's because Jesus does, not for sheep or silver coins, but for every lost sinner who repents. And he does it for people we might not think much of. We might just say that the drunk in the park or the girl on the corner got religion. And we might cynically wonder how long it will last. But Jesus rejoices, and he invites all his angels to rejoice with him. Earth shrugs while heaven parties. That's what we see in these two parables.

The key word in both parables is "repentance."

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What is repentance? The Bible talks about 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 bad, I stop doing that thing. I turn away from it, and I don't do it anymore.

But 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: repentance leads to good works. But quitting sin and doing good works is not repentance. Repentance is something else. Repentance is 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. And this is crucial for us to understand, because we have a temptation to be closed toward people who need 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.

The text starts with tax collectors and sinners drawing near to Jesus. And Jesus welcomed them. The Pharisees and scribes grumbled when they saw this. 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 welcomed 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.

Jesus told these parables to teach repentance.

In the first parable, Jesus is the Good Shepherd who goes looking for the one lost sheep. And when he finds it, he picks it up and carries it home. He doesn't even lead the sheep home. He carries it. Sheep, I'm told, when they are lost, get so scared they can't walk. So the shepherd has to carry it. This is a heavy burden, and it might be a long walk home, but the shepherd rejoices to do it.

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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).

Repentance is the key teaching of this parable. So pay attention to this part: 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. 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. It's not like the lost coin decided to just pop up out of whatever crack in the floor it had fallen into and polish itself off so the woman would notice it. It's not like the woman said, "Oh, good for you lost coin, you found your way back to the other nine." That would be ridiculous! The coin gets found. And that is repentance.

The shepherd throws a party because he found the sheep. The woman throws a party because she found the coin. 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.

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.

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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). And all of heaven rejoices. Amen.

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