

“Sinners Are Welcome”

Luke 15:1-10

Today’s Gospel lesson contains two familiar parables: The parables of the Lost Sheep and The Lost Coin. But the full impact of Christ’s stories is not seen without putting these parables into the context in which they were first told.

Through Luke’s introduction to these two parables, it is clear that he understood the necessity of hearing them in view of what Jesus had been teaching in the previous days. Jesus and the 12 disciples are journeying toward Jerusalem. They are days away from Palm Sunday. And the Lord has focused in on one major theme: table fellowship. Table fellowship language dominates Luke chapters 13 and 14, and table fellowship continues to be the context here in Luke 15.¹

Jesus has been criticized for eating with tax collectors and “sinners.” The Pharisees grumble against Him for welcoming these undesirables into

¹Just. *Luke*, 586.

His presence, just like the ancient Israelites grumbled in the wilderness when God did things His way.

The Pharisees do not like Christ's message from His many parables that only the repentant will be welcome to sit at Christ's table; or that only for the repentant do the people of God and angels rejoice.

And repentance is what the parable of The Lost Sheep (and parable of The Lost Coin) are all about. Now with the story of The Lost Sheep, Jesus tells it in such a way that sometimes we feel like that lost sheep, sometimes we need to be like the shepherd, and sometimes we are like the 99.

We all seem pretty sure of the role of the lost sheep, as the sinner who strayed away from the Lord and was unable to return other than by the Good Shepherd hoisting him onto His shoulders and joyfully carrying the sheep back home where he belongs. And we understand the role of the Good Shepherd who leaves the 99 – He does not abandon them. It was the common practice to have a number of shepherds tending a flock, especially a flock as large as the one in the parable.

We have these characters in the story nailed down as to what they represent. And sometimes we are that lost sheep in need of a repentant heart, and sometimes we are called to be that shepherd who seeks out those

lost in the wilderness and calls them to repent – to turn away, to change your mind. That isn't just the pastor's job. You have far more influence over the people in your life than you imagine – you have the Word of God.

But what about the 99? Do you like to think of yourself as being a part of the 99 who seemed to be doing what they were supposed to do? Don't answer too quickly, because the 99 aren't all that they're cracked up to be. When Jesus says: "I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance;" when He says such words about those who "do not need to repent," we should be reminded of the words spoken to Matthew the tax collector as Christ began His ministry: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

The 99 represent not the "truly righteous" but the "self-righteous" who claim and assume that they have no need for repentance – therefore they have no need for Jesus to take away the guilt of their sin.

The 99 sheep play the same role as the "good" son in the parable of the prodigal son, which just happens to be the parable that immediately follows our text for today in Luke's Gospel. The "good" son was jealous that the Father rejoiced over His sinful son's repentant heart.

The good son was jealous that the Father put on a banquet and welcomed the sinful son to join in table fellowship. Just as the shepherd returning with the lost sheep rejoiced in table fellowship with his friends and neighbors. Just as the woman who lost the silver coin rejoiced with friends and neighbors; and in that world all joyous gatherings involved a meal.

When we gather together here in God's House, our Good Shepherd has invited us to gather together as friends and neighbors, and as brothers and sisters in Christ, in table fellowship. When we approach the Lord's Table, we do that which the Pharisees refused to do, we acknowledge that there are sins for which we need God's forgiveness – sins which Jesus carried to the cross. And we welcome other sinners into our midst who also have been led to repent and turn from their sinful, wandering past.

We are called to come before the Lord, acknowledge the wrongs of the past, to turn away from them, and be refreshed and strengthened at the greatest of all table's: the Lord's Table; with the greatest of all food and drink: the body and blood of Christ. In Christ, the lost are found, sinners are forgiven, the dead are raised.

During His ministry, Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. This evening/morning, Jesus welcomes sinners to His table. Amen.