

Who Finds Who?

Luke 15:1-10

September 11, 2016

17th Sunday After Pentecost

In the exercise class I participate in at the Peak Fitness center, the instructor always plays music while we exercise. I guess it's supposed to either motivate us or take our minds off the pain caused by the exercising. One CD has all country music on it, including a song by the name of *Red Dirt Road*. One verse describes two very important events which happened for the singer on that road as he grew up. He says, "*It's where I drank my first beer; It's where I found Jesus.*" One day, after hearing this song and this verse many times, I quipped to the class, "Poor Jesus! Lost again!" Everyone laughed.

It does sound preposterous, doesn't it? Jesus being lost and all. Yet that's how many people talk. Many people like to say, "I found Jesus" to express how they began a life of faith. But for Jesus (or anyone) to be found, it implies that Jesus was lost to begin with. Does anyone seriously believe that's true? If we don't believe that, why do we talk that way?

I think it's because we like to be at the center of what's going on and in control of things. We want to be able to make all the critical decisions which affect our lives. This extends to our spiritual lives as well. Many people take great pride in claiming that *they* initiated their relationship with God. *They* found Jesus. *They* invited Jesus into their hearts. *They* made a decision to follow Jesus. That feels very satisfying to our pride to know that we did that. It fits right in with our American dream that says we can do anything we set our mind to if we just try hard enough.

But, as we consider our text for today, we have to consider the following question. When it comes to our relationship with God, who finds who?

Like the Pharisees and the scribes in our text, we probably would like to think we are part of the group that doesn't need to be found. We are basically decent people here in America. We don't murder or commit robbery. We are nice to other people (usually if they are nice to us.) Why does God even have to find nice people like us anyway? Aren't we naturally right there with Him?

The Bible paints a different picture of humanity. Like the coin in Jesus' parable, without any conscious action on our parts, we are lost. Why? We are born that way - sinful and separated from God - apart from anything we have done. We are dead in sin even before we are born. That means we can't find God any more than the coin could find the woman in our text.

In addition, we actively seek to separate ourselves from God. Isaiah says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way." (Isaiah 53:6) Our natural inclination is to deliberately go astray from God like sheep do from their shepherd. We turn from God's way - His Law for our behavior - and each of us goes our own way and establishes our own code for moral behavior that suits us. That means we don't want to find God. While that may *seem* like a good idea to us, it proves disastrous. When a sheep wanders from the flock and the shepherd, it heads for certain death - by starvation, falling off a cliff, or being devoured by a wolf. When we wander from the Lord and His Church, we head for certain death - starved for God's life-giving Word, falling into the grave, or being devoured by the devil.

In addition to our being lost causing devastating effects for each of us individually, it also causes God great grief. Like a faithful shepherd who greatly loves all of his sheep and a faithful woman who highly values her currency, God greatly loves and highly values every human being on earth. He never forgets those who wander from Him. He never gives up on those who have become lost. The Scriptures say, God "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Tim. 2:4)

There should be the same feeling among those who are in the fold. Instead of criticizing or ignoring those who are lost, the people of God share the concern and love of God. The people of God also desire all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

So how is this situation to be resolved? Jesus' parables teach that, since sheep don't want to find their shepherd and coins can't find their owner, someone has to find them. Since, by our sinful

nature, we can't find God and, by our sinful behavior show that we don't want to find God, He must find us. And He has.

Like a good and faithful shepherd, Jesus came into this world to find His lost sheep – to find you and me. The shepherd searches for sheep who have done nothing to prompt the search other than get lost. Jesus searches for you, me, and all people. We have done nothing to cause Him to do that other than having sinned. Like a shepherd who leaves the flock to find the one sheep, Jesus leaves everything to find you...and you...and you.

Jesus searched diligently for you. Like a shepherd who travels great distances, perhaps without food and water, in his search for one sheep, Jesus experienced great suffering and hardship in His search. He experienced every temptation the devil has to offer to sin and give up the search. But Jesus overcame the devil's temptations and perfectly obeyed the law of God for you. Jesus' search for you took Him to a cross and death. Unlike a regular shepherd who might flee from a wolf or lion and the death they could inflict, Jesus willingly takes on death and offers His life on the cross that He might find you.

And find you He has. By His Word, hidden in the waters of Holy Baptism, declared from the pulpit, and taught in Sunday School classes, our risen Lord Jesus has found you. Like a shepherd who gathers a lost sheep on his shoulders and rejoices, Jesus gathers you to Himself. He grants you repentance which is turning you away from the way that leads to death and hell and turning you to the way that leads to forgiveness and heaven.

And Jesus rejoices. The shepherd in the story rejoices to have the disobedient erring sheep back again because he loves it so much. In the same way, Jesus does not bawl you out when you are back, but rejoices that you *are* back in the fold again.

But there's more. In the parable, the shepherd calls his friends and neighbors (probably for a meal) and asks them to rejoice with him. It's not even their sheep but they rejoice with the shepherd for the sake of the sheep. In the same way, Jesus says, "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." The angels in heaven rejoiced when you were found. The angels in heaven rejoice every single time a sinner is found by Jesus, repents, and begins to trust in His Savior.

And we – the people of God – rejoice, too. Jesus calls us to rejoice. He has prepared this great meal of reconciliation called the Lord's Supper where we rejoice over our reconciliation with God and the reconciliation of all lost sheep who have been found, forgiven, and restored. That's why we celebrate and rejoice at every baptism. That's why we celebrate and rejoice on Sunday School Rally Day. That's why we celebrate and rejoice at every confirmation. That's why we celebrate and rejoice whenever new people join our congregation. Lost sheep are being found, restored, and renewed.

Thankfully, Jesus has never been lost. And, wherever you have your first beer, you don't have to find Jesus there, too. Rather, rejoice that we, who were lost and unable to find our way back to God, have been found by Jesus, received by Him through the forgiveness of sins won by Him on the cross, and restored to the life that never ends by virtue of His resurrection from the dead. And all of this because of God's great grace and marvelous mercy, without any merit or worthiness in any of us. As the beloved hymn puts it so well: *Amazing grace – how sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, Was blind but now I see.*" Amen