

**March 30, 2025**

**Sermon Text        Lk 15: 1-7 (NRSV)**

**15** Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to (Jesus). **2** And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

**3** So he told them this parable: **4** “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness 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 and rejoices. **6** And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.’ **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.

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word. **Thanks be to God!**

**Sermon Title: everything [in] between – lost & found**

What does it mean to be an insider, and what does it mean to be an outsider? This is an age old question, and something that is part of the lived experience of all of us, especially in adolescence. SE Hinton’s classic young adult novel, “The Outsiders,” portrayed the need to belong, the need for affiliation, in a small group of boys called the Greasers who didn’t fit into their small town norms. They created their own belonging – a code of language and behavior that bonded them together. And going through the challenges of moving into adulthood, with its pain of loss and grief, the outsiders felt like insiders with the unconditional support and love they gave to each other.

Jesus’ teachings peel back this issue of being an insider and being an outsider, shifting how the Jewish people of the first century looked at the people of God, Jews, compared to the Gentiles, everyone else. We’ve looked at this issue already through one lens during this Lenten season: being a stranger or a neighbor. Another variation of the insider/outsider categorization within religious teachings is being lost, or being found. Today, we look at being lost and found in Jesus’ teaching in the Parable of the Lost Sheep. And in this season of reflection,

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repentance and renewal, it helps us see repentance in a very different light in the Gospel message of Jesus.//

On Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, he continued to teach and preach his message of the kingdom of God, and the coming of God through his own incarnation on earth. He frequently taught in the presence of Pharisees, the majority group within the larger religious and Temple leadership. The Pharisees used the Talmud as the main interpretation of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. They held great influence in first century Jewish life, and solidified their position and control by relationship and cooperation with Herod and the Roman Empire's leaders in Palestine. They were listening frequently to Jesus, eating with him at times, attracted to this charismatic teacher but also constantly being tweaked by his very radical interpretations of faith and religious life, versus what had been taught for centuries. Not all of the Pharisees resisted Jesus' message; he had his supporters within that group, one by the name of Nicodemus, another was Joseph of Arimathea. But for most of the group, they resisted leaving the flock, bucking the majority viewpoint, sticking to the centuries old teachings of what it meant to be God's people.

So as we enter into this Scripture reading, we see Pharisees and religious law scholars observing Jesus teaching and hosting a meal for tax collectors and people they label "sinners." Now, we know what tax collectors are, but the second, "sinners" is a broad category. We always want to put our own contemporary cultural and moral definitions onto this label. But for the purposes of this morning, let's understand what it meant in Jesus' time. As the Pharisees were using it, this categorization applied to anyone who did not rigorously and consistently follow the exacting religious laws of worshiping, eating, living in family and community, living a holy life under Mosaic law as defined by centuries of religious definitions called the Talmud. These "laws to comply with Moses' law" were created to make it clear, to the believers in Yahweh, who was worthy to be in God's presence, who was righteous.

And so the Pharisees and scribes looked at these "sinners," people not devoutly living life in compliance with the Talmud, and questioned why a devout Jewish teacher would be interacting with these people. And not just interacting – inviting them in, eating with them, one of the most intimate gestures of hospitality in the Near East. To eat with people was to extend the most inviting hospitality there was. It wasn't just that Jesus was willing to be around them – he was welcoming them in. The Jewish insiders couldn't understand why someone

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from the inside would pull in someone from the outside. In the theology of that time, these “sinners” needed to repent first, and repentance was defined as compliance with religious law. Repentance to the Pharisees and scribes was a human action to bring the kingdom of God; it was a precondition to grace.

In response to their grumbling, Jesus started sharing stories that challenged the definition of repentance that was believed and taught by the Pharisees. These stories Jesus shared were directed at the Pharisee and scribes, and not the tax collectors and sinners they were grumbling about. So, to catch the attention of the Pharisees and scribes, he posed a question to them: “Which one of you – yes, you Pharisee, you scribe – having a hundred sheep ....” That would certainly catch their attention – they were most likely thinking: “are you asking us to put ourselves in the position of a shepherd?” That was considered an insult.

It’s strange what happened to the status of shepherds in first century Jewish life. After all, in the writings that became our Old Testament the great leaders of Israel were shepherds – the patriarchs Abraham, Issac and Jacob; Moses was a shepherd, and found God in a burning bush while tracking down one of his sheep; the young David, the great King of Israel, was a shepherd; many of the ancient prophets were shepherds. This is why Jesus referred to himself as the “good Shepherd,” a nod to the past leaders of the Jewish people, and his elevated position among these religious leaders of old. But in first century Jewish communal life, the vocation of shepherding had dropped in social status. We’ve heard this before at Christmas time, when we review the significance of the angels coming first to the shepherds, before anyone else outside Jesus’ parents, to proclaim the new king’s birth. For first century Palestine, shepherds would have been our equivalent to janitorial staff, migrant workers that pick lettuce and tomato – vocations that are necessary, but kept behind the scenes, work not really seen, not something you want your children or grandchildren to aspire to as a career. And so Jesus tweeks them a little bit – it was like saying “imagine you were a migrant lettuce picker ...” It was jolting, and certainly made them stop, and listen more closely.

So Jesus tells the story of a person with responsibility for one hundred sheep – a huge flock – and somehow realized one out of those one hundred sheep is missing. That’s the second thing that would have seemed a little ridiculous – one hundred sheep, out on the hillside, and you can do a nose count and detect that one is missing? The shepherd’s action of leaving the ninety-nine and going

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out to find the one is sometimes taken as almost a negligence of the others. But with a flock that large, they would have more than a couple shepherds on duty. Even today you don't see one person caring for that many grazing sheep. So that isn't what we should focus on. The focus should be on the shepherd's actions from that point on. The title that is historically given to this parable, The Lost Sheep, also veers the focus. The sheep isn't to blame for losing track of the flock; it's probably just focused on its immediate needs, looking for the next clump of grass and brush to munch on. No, the purpose of the story is to focus on the shepherd – maybe a better title would be “The Searching and Finding Shepherd.”

Or, “The Rejoicing Shepherd.” Because Luke uses the words “rejoice” and “joy” repeatedly in this story. In the joyous response of the shepherd, we find a new understanding of repentance, different from the one being taught by the Pharisees. *First, we see joy in the burden of restoring that which was lost.* The shepherd got the one sheep back home by picking it up and carrying it across his shoulders. Unlike the paintings of a little lamb being cuddled on the walk home, sheep are BIG. They're HEAVY. So putting 80+ pounds across your shoulders – 'cause that fella is too big and awkward to cuddle – is a physical burden. And yet Jesus says, “When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.” Having joy in lugging that heavy fella home. The load he took on is not too heavy – joy replaces feelings of being burdened.

Next, we hear joy again – *joy in being restored to the community.* “When (the shepherd) comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me ....’” Being found encompasses being brought back to others. Jesus is saying being found isn't complete if the celebration isn't with others. Being found happens in community – it's not an individual task that can be accomplished on our own. The shepherd models this – it wasn't just to bring the sheep back to the flock, even back to its gated pen in the village for the night. He is making a big deal out of this moment. The loss to the owner of the flock is one thing. Jesus is saying: it would have been an even bigger loss to the larger community.

Finally, we see *an unconditional grace given to the lost.* Luke does not blame the sheep in his retelling of this story. How it became lost, how it got separated isn't explained – its irrelevant. We just know the lost is found. The how, when, where doesn't matter – “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” If we compare this story to its paired parable that immediately follows, the Parable of the Lost Coin, this message is really clarified. You may insist on trying to put blame on the sheep for letting itself get separated ... but a

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coin? A coin doesn't have legs, and can't walk off on its own. In the follow-up story, the owner is probably the one at fault for misplacing the coin. But it doesn't matter how it was separated from its owner. It only matters that it was found.

In Kenneth Bailey's analysis of historical and cultural factors that help explain the Gospels, he points out that there was an historical argument between different rabbis in first century Judaism, arguing which is better: "the perfectly righteous person," or the "repentant sinner." "The perfectly righteous person" was defined by Jewish religious law as following all of the moral rules and external behaviors, crossing all the "t's" and dotting all the "i's". The "repentant sinner," was someone who begins to comply again with the letter of the law as outlined in the Torah and Talmud. Jesus is throwing out the legitimacy of the argument all together. Debating between righteous person and repentant sinner isn't the point, Jesus is saying. He redefines the point. In the story of the response of the shepherd, Jesus is teaching a new definition of repentance, one not initiated by the person but initiated by grace. For Jesus, repentance is unconditional grace to the lost. Repentance is not a human action needed to bring the coming kingdom; repentance is a response to the kingdom that has already come. And Jesus is alluding to himself as that coming.

That sheep did nothing to prompt or initiate its rescue. That sheep didn't do anything to cause the shepherd to begin his search. And so we start getting a new picture of being found. Being found in Jesus' teaching is the new definition of repentance. And as a consequence, Jesus also erased the lines between insider and outsider. This parable is alluding back to Isaiah 53:6, when the prophet proclaimed, "all are like sheep that have gone astray ...." Jesus' teaching isn't about who is on the inside and who is on the outside. Who is found and who is lost. Jesus' description in this parable changed the argument, from the "righteous person" vs. "repentant sinner" to ALL are lost sheep. ALL need a Shepherd to guide them. ALL must repent, so all must be found. It's not an either/or. We are lost without our Shepherd, Jesus, to bring us home to the community of faith. We are lost without the unmerited grace of God through the God-head incarnated, Jesus the Christ, who brings us back to relationship with God and each other through his saving actions in Jerusalem. All of us are lost; all of us must be found, again and again.

Jesus asked the Pharisees to imagine themselves into this story. And so, listening to it today, Jesus is asking us to imagine ourselves in the story. How do

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YOU place yourself in it? If you are honest with yourself: are you the shepherd? Are you the Pharisee? Are you one that rejoices when anyone comes through these doors, celebrating the experience of a community finding a lost part of itself? Or do you hesitate, assess the situation first, look to see how they fit in, weigh them against a standard of behavior that meets a definition of appropriateness for a godly, church-going person?

As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, and Jesus' teaching reinforced, ALL of us are lost without our divine Shepherd, seen in Jesus, as he made clear in his own words. For the religiously devout, who assumed by staying in the flock of the religiously legal compliant, Jesus is shaking his head: God isn't rejoicing over you. God's rejoicing over the one who is found by Jesus through faith alone. This isn't earned; it's freely given. God's grace to all through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was through the divine act of going out to us, and finding us when we listen to his call.

And so, another question lingers over this short parable: are we just the sheep? If, as we claim, we are the disciples, following in the footsteps of Jesus, following his example, shouldn't we also be the shepherd? Not just waiting for the lost to come back into the fold, but going out to them, searching for them, and in the finding of them, take on the heavy burden of carrying them into God's family? Not paying off other shepherds to do that hard work, but jumping in and going out ourselves? Are we the rejoicing shepherd in this heavy work of Christ? Or, are we grumbling off to the side about why we people aren't coming back into the flock on their own?

Lost and found. At the same time? When we look at ourselves as part of the flock, we always at risk of being lost – focusing on the wrong priorities, rationalizing our behavior to compensate for those areas in our life where we don't live in total trust and reliance on our Shepherd. And when we look at ourselves as the shepherd, we carry the burdens of others, rejoicing in their return to community, regardless of the how, when or why they were lost. Because, we too often lose our way. But God's grace finds us every time we lose our way – if we only answer the call. Amen.