Sermon | Proper 19C

TEXT: Luke 15:1-10

11 Sept. 2016

The Seeking Shepherd

In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.

*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near [to Jesus] to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”*

THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

Dear saints of God,

This man receives sinners. Tax collectors. Prostitutes. You know, the lowest of the low in society. Folks whom the Scribes and Pharisees wouldn’t be caught dead having fellowship with. This man is different. This Jesus receives sinners.

And why did they come to Jesus? What was it about Jesus’ preaching that drew them to him? Was it not because they were finding in Jesus a message that they weren’t getting from the religious leaders of their day? They found in Jesus a message of God’s love, of God’s mercy and compassion, for the unworthy and the undeserving—folks just like them. You see, these are precisely the people whom Christ came into this world for, for those who had made a mess out of their lives, for those who found themselves ruined by their own sinful, self-destructive behaviors. The lost sheep.

But the Scribes and the Pharisees grumbled against him. And why did they grumble? They grumbled because they held to a religion of works. Because they held to a religion that said, “God loves you only if you’re good. He hates you if you’re bad. So you better start keeping his rules, or else you will be punished forever.” That was the religion of the Pharisees. It was a religion that said God’s kingdom is only for the holy and the righteous, for those who had achieved some kind of moral perfection through obedience to the Law. And they were confident in their own righteousness—the Pharisees. But the ungodly and the sinner—the sort of people whom Jesus was receiving—there was no hope for them.

That’s the religion of works. And we need to understand that that religion of works—the religion that says God only loves the good people and hates the evil people—that religion of works is not only the religion of the Pharisees, it’s the religion of the world. It’s the way the world believes and thinks. That religion is only about keeping the rules. God loves you if you keep his rules, he hates you if you break his rules. And the reason so many of our non-Christian friends and neighbors never darken the door of a Church on Sunday morning is because they look at their lives and realize they haven’t kept the rules. And so they conclude they don’t belong here, that they’re not good enough to be here. As if the Church was this prestigious club of super-holy religious people, like the Pharisees. You hear people saying, “I’ll come to Church after I get my act together.” As if we’ve got our acts together. That’s the religion of works.

You see, the world knows nothing of the Gospel, nothing of the forgiveness of sins, nothing of the message of the grace and mercy of God which is ours because Christ loved us and gave himself for us on the cross, shedding his blood to redeem us from sin, death, and hell, to reconcile us to God. The world knows nothing of the Gospel. But that’s what Jesus came to preach. And that’s why the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to him, because they were finding in Jesus a message they weren’t getting anywhere else—a message of God’s grace and mercy that was precisely for them. And they came to believe, through the preaching of the Gospel, “There is hope for me, unholy sinner that I am, there is hope for me in Jesus.” And their consciences were comforted.

And dear saints, that’s why you’re here this morning. You’re not here to learn the rules. You’re here to hear the Gospel. Because you know and believe this about yourself—and the Law has taught you to believe it—that you are just like those tax collectors and sinners who were drawing near to Jesus to hear him. You too stand just as much need of the grace and the mercy of God as they did.

And you know this too about the Law—and this is what the Pharisees didn’t understand—God didn’t give us his Law so that, by keeping the Law, we could make ourselves righteous. God gave us his Law to show us our sin, and how desperately we need a Savior. God gave us his Law so that we might repent and be ready to hear that wonderful message that, as St. Paul said in the Epistle, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost, or chief” [1 Tim. 1:15] so that we might see ourselves as one of them, and rejoice, that we too are the objects of God’s mercy and compassion in Christ.

And so in this morning’s Gospel, Jesus tells these two parables, the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin, to show that his kingdom isn’t a kingdom of works but of mercy, to show that is work is all about seeking and saving the lost, and bringing sinners back home to God.

Jesus says, *“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? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 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.’* And so who are we in the Parable? We are the lost sheep. And Jesus is the shepherd who comes after us and finds us. Jesus is the God who spoke in the Old Testament, “*Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out*.” [Ez. 34:11] Jesus is the Good Shepherd.

Now I think you know that I choose the picture for the bulletin. And there are a lot of pictures on the web of Jesus as the shepherd with sheep. And in many of the pictures, the sheep is cute and fluffy, waiting for his shepherd to come and find him. Ears perked up to hear his Shepherd’s voice. But you know, none of the pictures were really desperate enough to illustrate what’s going on here.

And then I found the picture that’s on our cover for today. Take a look. Now that’s a desperate picture. Look at that sheep. He’s on a cliff. And we wonder, how did he even get out there in the first place? And he’s completely stuck. He’s not trying to find his way home. He’s not looking for his shepherd. He’s crouched down, paralyzed with fear, surrounded on all sides by danger and death. There is no way this sheep could save himself. And perhaps the one aspect of this picture that I like the best: he’s turned away. The sheep has his back is turned away from his shepherd. He’s not even looking to be found.

And dear saints, that’s a picture of man in sin. Sin has us so completely turned away from God that the only thing we can do is get ourselves more lost. Just think of the prodigal son: how the prodigal son turned away from his father—from his father’s house, his father’s provision, his father’s kindness, and turned toward his own destruction. That’s a picture of man in sin. “All we like sheep have gone astray,” the prophet Isaiah says, “we have *turned*, every one of us, to his own way.”

You know, you hear in some Christian circles language that goes like this: “Jesus loves you. He died for you. But if you’re going to be saved, you have to make a choice for Jesus, you have to make a decision for Christ, or choose to accept Jesus into your heart,” as if we even have the capacity or the free will to even begin to cooperate with God toward our own salvation.

But just look at this sheep. This sheep doesn’t have the free will to find his shepherd. The only thing the sheep has the free will to do is get himself even more lost; get himself into more danger or more trouble. But now look at the shepherd. He’s the one who does the seeking and the finding. The responsibility of that sheep’s salvation rests entirely with him. He leaves the ninety nine. He goes into the wilderness. He finds his lost sheep. And when he finds him lost and afraid, paralyzed by terrors and fears, he picks it up, throws it around his shoulders, and takes it home, rejoicing.

And so this shepherd leaving the ninety nine, and going out in search of his lost one is a picture of Jesus, what Jesus has done for you. That the Son of God left his Father’s throne in heaven. How he took on flesh—your flesh, and was made man, for you; and just as the shepherd bears the burden of carrying the lamb home, so Jesus shoulders the burden of our sin to the cross and pays the price for our salvation in the shedding of his blood.

And so it’s not we who choose to find Jesus, “Lord, ‘tis not that I did choose thee, that I know could never be.” It’s Jesus who finds us. And our being found by him is the cause of heaven’s rejoicing: *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.*

And so this morning, we rejoice. We rejoice because “I once was lost, but now am found.” We rejoice because “By grace I’m saved grace free and boundless.” We rejoice because “Lord ‘tis not that I did choose thee, that I know could never be.” But Jesus our Good Shepherd has found us. He will never leave us nor forsake us. And by our Shepherd’s side, we will always know safety and love and mercy and compassion and peace and everlasting rest.

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

