

Have you ever lost something and then found it again? Children here, maybe you had a favorite toy and you lost it, but then you found it again. Do you remember the joy that you felt when you found that toy? Adults, maybe you lost your car keys or your wallet. Or maybe you lost something that had sentimental value to you and then you found it again. Do you remember the *joy* you felt when you found it? Well in the Gospel today, Jesus tells us that God feels *joy* when a lost sinner repents. He feels joy because God loves the lost. And we should too. So the theme for our sermon today is:

### Love the Lost

1. By joining Jesus in his search.
2. By joining Jesus in his joy.

First, love the lost by joining Jesus in his search. The Gospel for today begins, **“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” (Luke 15:1-2)** The Pharisees criticized Jesus because he welcomed sinners. Jesus responded to their criticism by telling three stories: 1) the parable of the lost sheep, 2) the parable of the lost coin and, in the verses right after our passage for today 3) the parable of the prodigal son. The first story Jesus tells is about a shepherd who looks for his lost sheep. **“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?” (Luke 15:4)** The shepherd doesn’t say, “Well, I still have ninety-nine sheep.” No. He goes after that one lost sheep. And he goes after that one lost sheep because he cares about that sheep. A sheep is helpless out there on its own. A sheep is defenseless against wolves. A sheep cannot find its own way. I’m told that if a sheep gets lost, often it will just lay down and give up. Isn’t that sad? Now if we care about a sheep, how much more should we care a person who has wandered from Christ and is lost?

And the Shepherd does not say, “Let the sheep find its way back on its own.” No the shepherd actively goes and looks for the sheep. If a shepherd actively goes and looks for a sheep who is lost, how much more should we actively look for people who are straying from Christ? If someone has strayed from church and has not come to church for a long time, the temptation for us is to say, “Well, hopefully they will come back someday,” but then not do anything about it. But that’s kind of like the shepherd saying, “Let the sheep find its way back on its own.” We don’t want to say that. We want to join Jesus in his search. That’s why here at St. John’s we have two committees, the Shepherding Committee and the elders board. And these two committees, at the request of the pastors, reach out to people by phone call or visit or letter who haven’t come to church in a while. They should be commended for their work because they are lovingly doing what Jesus says in this passage. And not only should they be commended, but we should all join them in their work. Everyone here knows someone who hasn’t come to church in a long time. Maybe it’s a friend. Maybe it’s a family member. Maybe it’s a son or a daughter. Join Jesus in search by inviting them to come to church with you. You might say, “Well, pastor they are kind of sensitive about this issue.” I understand that. But you love them. Jesus loves them. And aren’t there certain circumstances in life where love overrides everything? Let that love that you have for them override your nervousness. Let your love for the lost override the awkwardness of bringing it up. Love the lost by joining Jesus in his search.

Jesus tells another story to make the same point. He says, **“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?” (Luke 15:8)** This story makes a similar point as the first story. The woman does not say, “Well, I still have nine coins.” She looks carefully for that one coin. The element that this second story adds is that it emphasizes the careful effort that

this woman puts into finding her lost coin.<sup>1</sup> **Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?" (Luke 15:8)** She had to put in effort to find that coin. But the coin was so valuable to her she was willing to put in that effort. If a coin is valuable, how much more valuable is a soul which Jesus bought with his blood.<sup>2</sup> It might be difficult to invite someone to church who hasn't been to church in a long time. But if the woman went through all of that effort to find a lost coin, how much more should we expend effort to reach out to a soul who is wandering? Love the lost by joining Jesus in his search. You know back when Jesus was here on earth with us in visible form, he searched carefully and diligently for the lost. Jesus still searches diligently for the lost today, only now he uses us to do it. One devotion writer said it well: **"[Christ] made me a Christian so that he could continue searching for the lost with my eyes, going after the lost with my feet, calling the lost with my voice."**<sup>3</sup> Love the lost by joining Jesus in his search. And, secondly, love the lost by joining Jesus in his joy.

Both stories that Jesus tells emphasizes the joy that God feels when one sinner repents. About the shepherd Jesus says, **"And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'" (Luke 15:5-6).** Jesus says the same thing about the woman when she finds her coin. **"She calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'" (Luke 15:9)** God wants us to rejoice with him when a sinner repents. And that joy starts by realizing that once we were lost and now we're found. Pause and think about the fact that there have been moments when God and his angels have specifically rejoiced over you.<sup>4</sup> Jesus says, **"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15:7).** And again, **"In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10)** There have been moments when heaven has had a party specifically over you. There was rejoicing in heaven when God found you in your baptism. There was rejoicing in heaven when you came back to church after a period of absence. If you fell away from church for a while, there was rejoicing in heaven when you came back. If you were caught in a sin, heaven rejoiced when you breathed a repentant prayer.

You know, when the Pharisees said, **"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2),** they meant it as a criticism. But the man who wrote the hymn we sang before "Jesus Sinners Does Receive"<sup>5</sup> took those words of the Pharisees and turned them into a hymn of praise to Jesus.<sup>6</sup> **"Jesus Sinners Does Receive"** is just a paraphrase of **"This man welcomes sinners."** The Pharisees meant it as a criticism, but we mean it as praise because we know that we are sinners and Jesus welcomed. And because Jesus welcomed us, we also should welcome sinners. That does not mean that we condone their sin. Jesus never compromised with sin, but sinners knew that they could approach Jesus. It says, **"The tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus" (Luke 15:1).** Literally the Greek word says, "They were drawing near to listen to Jesus." Sinners knew that they could approach Jesus. And they knew that they could approach Jesus because Jesus made it obvious that he loved them and that he cared about them. And so they were willing to draw near and listen to Jesus. And as Jesus taught them, he lovingly urged them to repent. That's why he said at the end of the parable, **"In the same way I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (15:10)** If you are caught in a sin right now, whether it is a sin of self-righteousness or a sin of hatred or a sexual sin, you need to repent. To repent means to be sorry for your sins, turn away from

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<sup>1</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 113.

<sup>2</sup> I owe this insight to Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 403).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Eickmann, Devotion on Luke 15:4-6, 8-9 in *His Word Our Delight: Devotions for all who share God's Word* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1998), 91.

<sup>4</sup> I owe this insight to Paul Eickmann,

<sup>5</sup> Erdmann Neumeister. CW: 304.

<sup>6</sup> I owe this insight to Paul Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary on the Bible*, New Testament vol. I (St. Louis: Concordia), 348.

your sins and trust in Jesus for forgiveness. We are reading today from the Gospel of Luke. Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. In both books Luke emphasizes that John the Baptist and Jesus and the Apostles all emphasized that people should repent. In the book of Acts Peter said, **“Repent, then, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out” (Acts 4:19)**. Repent and turn to God and your sins will be wiped out of God’s book. Later in the book of Acts, Paul said, **“I preached that [people] should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds” (Acts 26:20)**. We should all repent and turn from our sins and trust in Jesus for forgiveness. And when we repent there is rejoicing in heaven.

And since there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents, there should also be rejoicing among us here on earth. When Jesus had the two people in his parable say **“Rejoice with me”** that was Jesus’ way of inviting the Pharisees to join him in his rejoicing over one sinner who repents. If a sinner is not repentant, when should we tell them that we love them and care about them and we should lovingly urge them to repent. As soon as that person repents, we should assure them that they are forgiven and show our love to them (see 2 Corinthians 5:8) and join Jesus in his joy. Love the lost by joining Jesus in his joy.

We have all experienced the agony of losing something and the joy of finding it again. God feels that same joy when a sinner repents. He feels that joy because he loves the lost. We should too. Love the lost by joining Jesus in his search and by joining Jesus in his joy. Amen.

