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Lost Sheep, Lost Coins

Luke 15:1-10

¹ Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ 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. ⁸ “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

CHRIST TEACHES THAT SINNERS MIGHT REPENT AND ANGELS REJOICE

I. They'll Get Theirs

We Wish They'd Get Theirs

I suppose you've all been hearing, one way or another, what's happening in Iraq. First it was soldiers being kidnapped. Then it was civilian contractors. Now it's aid workers, and female aid workers at that. As if kidnapping isn't enough, in the name of God these people have had their heads hacked off with blunt knives by some of the poorest specimens of humanity our race has ever produced.

Even the Nazis used gas to kill their prisoners. I filled out my application for US citizenship last week, which I haven't filed yet 'cause we've already overspent our “Homeland Security” budget for this quarter. There were at least three questions about whether I'd ever been a Nazi, served the Nazi government, or worked at a Nazi concentration camp. I remember answering one question about terrorism. Are we going to start asking whether we've ever decapitated, watched a decapitation, or planned a decapitation of an American?

In the days after September 11, I remember hearing a pastor in Texas talk about his solution to the problem of terrorism – nuclear weapons. We have lots, just sitting in silos in South Dakota. Lob a couple, say on Bagdad, Riyadh, and a few other ads, and we'll show those terrorists whose boss. No more kinder, gentler America – it's time to send the Middle East a little message from Uncle Sam, courtesy of the Red, White and Blue, hoo, hoo for you.

Shouldn't they get theirs? We talk about homosexual marriage over here, men marrying men and women marrying women, as if this is the worst possible affront to natural law and moral order. How about hacking people's heads off? Where does that fall on the continuum of “good” vs. “evil”? Doesn't it make you mad? Isn't about time these people got theirs?

The Pharisees Wished They'd Get Theirs

If you are mad, and you do wish you'd get theirs, you have great company in today's Gospel lesson. Congratulations, and welcome to the Party of the Pharisees. See, we love to hate the Pharisees. They were always the ones judging Jesus, trying to trap him, grumbling about everything he did or didn't do. Just never happy.

But there was one thing they loved more than anything in the whole world: and that was God, and his law. They loved God with a passion. They wanted to serve him and do what was right. People who purposefully shunned God and did the complete opposite of what the Scriptures said they should, made them madder than a Texan at a gun-control rally. In the words of the Bible, they were jealous for the Lord their God, and they figured people who weren't – should get theirs.

For them, that's what good preaching was all about: condemning sin, and showering down judgment on the sinners and tax collectors. That's what prophets were for – pointing out the people going to heaven, and the people going to hell. The people going to heaven are the ones who've kept the laws of the Lord since their youth. The people going to hell were the ones who didn't. Period, the end.

II. Christ Gives Them His Instead

Christ Gives the Sinners His

Which was exactly what Jesus didn't do. He didn't preach hell-fire and brimstone, pointing out that the Pharisees were God's chosen people, and the tax collectors and sinners didn't have a prayer. He gave them a prayer instead. He listened to them. He called them to repentance. He asked them to believe in him, to be washed by him, to drink and eat from him, to receive eternal life from him.

Jesus had a different plan. He looked at those who were breaking the law, who were spitting on God, and he didn't get mad. He got sad. He looked at the tax collectors and sinners and saw not evildoers to be judged, but lost sheep to be shepherded and lost coins to light a lamp and search for. He came not to sentence to hell and throw away the key, but to search and find and redeem and reclaim. He came not with hatred, but with hope in his heart.

And the Pharisees couldn't stand it. They couldn't understand it, because they couldn't look in their hearts and see the sinner and the tax collector just waiting to get out. They didn't want a savior for themselves. They wanted a judge who would accuse others and make them look good.

Christ Asks the Same of Us

Too often, we can't stand it either. Lutheran pastors are often asked if mass murderers can be forgiven, or rapists, or terrorists who kill children and hack off people's heads. Maybe you've asked the same question. The Pharisees' answer is "Of course not. They've transgressed the law, they're sinners, and they'll be judged accordingly." It's so hard to see people who commit these atrocious acts as lost sheep worth looking for, or lost coins worth searching for.

Yet they, too, are lost sheep, lost coins. How many of them are waiting to hear that there is another and better way? How many of the Islamic terrorists in Iraq have ever heard that God is not wrath, but love? In the take over of the school in southern Russia, it's been said that some of the terrorists tried to feed and give water to the teachers and students. Who knows what they thought in their hearts? Maybe they wished there was another way. Maybe they thought they had no other choice but to take over that school. We'll never know, because they were shot and killed by their own leaders, by their own Pharisees.

If we were the ones kidnapped in Iraq, would we have the courage to tell them about our Savior? Could we face our own beheading, look into the eyes of our captives, and think, "this is a lost sheep, a lost coin, for whom Christ died"? Or would we only match their hatred with our own hatred, and hope that God would kill them before they killed us?

III. Christ Give Us His Too

Christ Shows Patience to Us

In the end, the Pharisees and the tax collectors and sinners have more in common they can admit. The Pharisees are lost coins and lost sheep, too. They think they've kept the law because they haven't really READ the law. They aren't able to read the Ten Commandments and see a problem. Loving God is a full time job. Keeping the Sabbath is a full time job. A passing lustful thought breaks the 6th commandment, and with it the whole law. A grudge or angry thought against a friend or even an enemy break the 5th commandment, and with it the whole law. The Pharisees can't see their own sin, and so they don't realize they, too are lost sheep and lost coins.

The same is true of us. When we feel the hatred rising against the terrorists, against their murders and adulterers of the world, we get just a little inkling of what lurks deep in our hearts, and how God feels about it. What you feel about the ones beheading aid workers in Iraq is just a little taste of the anger God feels toward our own sinful nature. So if we're asking God to come down and judge their sins, we may find ourselves under the same condemnation. "All we like sheep have gone astray," preached the prophet Isaiah. "Surely I was sinful at birth," wrote King David, the man after God's own heart.

That's why Jesus tells these parables. He wasn't born into the world to side with the self-righteous Pharisees, but to seek and find the ones who had to admit they WEREN'T righteous. He went to find them, to bring them back to the flock of God. Because, Jesus says, that's what makes the angels happy. That's what brings the whole company of heaven to its feet. That's what makes the seraphim and cherubim sing loudest before the throne of God. When the evil do not repent, and receive the condemnation they deserve, there is only a silent weeping. But when a sinner or tax collector or grocer or bank teller or auto mechanic or retiree turns from their sins and lives, the party in heaven goes on all night.

We Ought to Show Patience to Others

Christ Jesus came to save sinners, not to condemn them. He came to take the worst of sinners and make them into new creations, to show mercy, to show his unlimited patience with us. Ought we not do the same with others? The next time you're tempted to condemn, think of the patience the Lord has shown you. You've probably all heard the expression, "There but for the grace of God go I." But do we really believe that? Can we look at the bandanaed terrorist, who's just gleefully killed his victim and say, "Lord, there but for the grace you've shown me, go I"? Can we look at the mass murderer and think, "Here is one for whom Christ died"? Are we able to say like Paul, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, *of whom I am the worst*"?

Frankly, I would claim to be the lost sheep who was found, than one of the ninety-nine. It's comforting to know that my Lord wants me to be found, wants all of his lost sheep to be found. It means there is still hope for the world. It means that the Lord will never give up on any of us until the end of time. It means that the Lord is still relenting, and not bringing on us the disaster he had threatened.

I believe there is still a party going on in heaven for each of us. I believe that heaven is filled with singing over all of us lost sheep who have repented. I know that despite the sickness and evil of the world, there's still a lot more sheep to be found, more coins to find, and a lot more partying to do.

Amen.