

"The Joy of Recovery"

"Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Over the years, I've gotten into the habit of looking through the pews following a wedding or funeral service to pick up any items that may have inadvertently been left behind. This collection has varied over the years from sunglasses and hats to more valuable items like wallets and purses. But the most memorable of these "left behind" items was something that at first didn't seem that significant of valuable: it was a small handkerchief that I noticed on the floor under one of the pews following a funeral service. As usual, I picked it up and brought it into our office's "lost and found," with all the other items that are left behind and often never claimed. Because it didn't seem to be that important, I didn't pay much attention to it until I received a phone call early the next morning from a woman who was obviously quite upset and asked if we had found anything in the sanctuary following the funeral service. I went to the lost and found box and named off the items; when I mentioned the handkerchief, there was shout of joy so ear-piercing that it hurt my ears. The woman on the other end of the phone shouted, "I'll be right down" and hung up. Ten minutes later, a car drove into our parking lot and came to a screeching halt; its driver got out and ran into the building, found the office, and excited asked "where is the handkerchief?" When I gave it to her, there were tears in her eyes as she hugged it and thanked my profusely. She explained that this handkerchief had been given to her by the grandmother whose funeral service was in the church the previous day. She had embroidered it when this granddaughter was born, and it had always been a precious heirloom that she feared had been lost. While to me it appeared to have little value, the joy I witnessed when what had been lost was found spoke volumes of how precious this handkerchief was to this woman, and the wonder a person experiences in the joy of discovery, of finding something that appeared to be lost forever.

The value of an item is not always viewed equally by every person. While some things we own or purchase do have a set price, some of our most valuable possessions would be of little value to another person. The worth of these items is not in how much money they might bring in a sale; their value comes in their meaning to us, the important relationships or memories they symbolize. If it is true that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," then the value of what is considered precious is also in the eye of the person who sees something special that another person would miss.

The two parables in today's Gospel lesson center on items that at first do not appear to have any great value, certainly not enough to inspire the response of the central figures in each story. One sheep or one coin were not of great worth, yet each person searches diligently until each is found, and calls together friends and neighbors for a celebration. The sheep and the coin have a value to the shepherd and the woman that we might not understand but speak to the greater meaning of each parable about the value God places on what we might not consider worthy or important.

In the previous chapter in Luke's Gospel, Jesus was the dinner guest in the home of a Pharisee, which became an occasion for teaching about life in the Kingdom of God. In this chapter, Jesus takes the role of the dinner host, to which he invites "*all the tax collectors and sinners*" (15:1), prompting the Pharisees and scribes who are watching from the sidelines that "*this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" (15:2). Those designated as "sinners" (*hamartolos*) by the Pharisees would have included not only persons who broke the moral laws but also those who did not maintain ritual purity as it was practiced by the Pharisees. The Pharisees and scribes were offended because these "outcasts" were not simply in

Jesus' presence, but because he "welcomes" them, a sign and seal of full acceptance. The scandal was that Jesus received such outcasts, shared table fellowship with them, and even played host to them. Jesus' critics found "*in the presence of tax collectors and sinners around Jesus something contradictory, or inappropriate, or unsavory, or repulsive, or socially disruptive, or in violation of the nature and purpose of true religion.*" (Fred Craddock).

Jesus' response is not to speak directly to the criticism of the Pharisees and scribes but to once again use this occasion as a teaching moment, using parables to share the Gospel message of the kingdom of God that Jesus has come to proclaim. He begins with a parable in which a shepherd who has lost one of his 100 sheep decides to "*leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it.*" (15:4). This parable of the Lost Sheep is based on the Old Testament image of God as Israel's shepherd:

- "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." – Isaiah 40:11.
- "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." – Psalm 23:1-3.
- "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and I will seek them out ... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God." – Ezekiel 34:11, 15.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the shepherd served as the image of the religious leaders of the people who at times, like hired hands, did not serve the flock well; when Jesus identifies himself as the "Good Shepherd," he offers an alternative to the reputation of shepherds of his time as shiftless, thieving, trespassing hirelings who were listed as one of the despised trades by the rabbis:

- "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep." – John 10:11-15.

The shepherd of Jesus' parable is no hired hand who cares little for the sheep in his charge; every one of the 100 sheep in the flock is precious to him so that he cannot accept the loss of a single one of them. He searches for the lost sheep even though the odds of finding the sheep are steep:

- "The wilderness of Judea is hilly and has many places sheep could navigate but humans could not, which could make the sheep difficult to find. The myriad predators (jackals, hyenas, leopards and foxes) would have rendered the sheep vulnerable. The shepherd looks for the lost sheep with ostensibly little hope of finding it or finding it alive. Against all odds to the contrary, the shepherd discovers the sheep and restores it to the flock." – Amanda Brobst-Renaud.

The shepherd does not merely restore the lost sheep to the flock when it is found; "*he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'*" (15:6). This example of the joy of recovery is indicative of the joy of recovering what was lost in the Kingdom of God, because "*there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine*

righteous person who need no repentance." (15:7). While others might dismiss such "sinners" as being of little worth, in the eyes of God they are as precious as is the lost sheep to the shepherd who lovingly lays it on his shoulders and carries it back to the flock.

- "Therefore the sum of the gospel is this: the kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of grace and mercy, in which there is never anything but carrying. Christ bears our griefs and infirmities. He takes our sins upon himself and is patient when we fall. We always rest on his shoulders, and he never tires of carrying us, which should be the greatest comfort to us when we are tempted to sin. Preachers in this kingdom should comfort the consciences, and deal kindly with them, and feed them with the gospel. They should carry the weak, heal the sick, and know just how to minister the Word to each person according to their need." – Martin Luther.

Jesus' second parable centers on a woman who has lost one of her ten silver coins. A drachma was a silver coin worth about a denarius, a day's wage, not a great sum of money. But like the shepherd, she sees something of worth in this coin that goes far beyond its monetary value: she lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until she finds it. Also like the shepherd, finding the coin is an occasion for rejoicing: "*When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'*" (15:9). The woman's diligence and her experience of the joy of recovery that she shares with others is once again indicative of the "*joy in the presence of the angels over one sinner who repents.*" (15:10). The parable focuses on God's joy at the recovery of what had been lost. The emphasis is on the joy of recovery, not on the need for repentance. In both parables, rejoicing calls for celebration.

- "Whether one will join the celebration is all-important because it reveals whether one's relationships are based on merit or mercy. Those who find God's mercy offensive cannot celebrate with the angels when a sinner repents. Thus they exclude themselves from God's grace... The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin expose the grudging spirit that prevents us from receiving God's mercy. Only those who can celebrate God's grace to others can experience that mercy themselves." – Alan Culpepper.

These parables point us to the reality of how one thing can be viewed differently by various groups, how something that has little value to one is seen as precious by another. To the Pharisees and scribes, the tax collectors and sinner that were gathered at table with Jesus were outcasts, persons whose life choices made them unworthy to take a seat at any "respectable" table with those whose righteousness made them worthy of their place among others. But to Jesus, every person is precious; every person – no matter what they may have done or how they are seen by others – is a child of God, one for whom Jesus was born and for whom he will give his life.

- "Mediating total fellowship with himself and God, he accepts people as they are, requiring only a confession of need, not of specific sins, opposing the idea that a right relationship with God comes by legal observance. Jesus does not demand awareness of sin to the point of abject self-contempt and self-condemnation." – Geoffrey Bromiley.

There is a third parable that is missing from today's Gospel lesson, one that focuses not on a lost sheep or a lost coin but a lost son. Unlike the others, this central figure chooses to become lost, taking the inheritance that his father inexplicably gives to him and traveling "*to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.*" (15:13). It is only when he is reduced to the humiliating task of feeding pigs does this "prodigal son" come to his senses and realizes the error of his ways, of how he

has sinned against heaven and before his father and is “*no longer worthy to be called your son.*” (15:19). But when he returns home, seeking to be treated as one of the hired hands, the waiting father “*saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.*” (15:20). The father – like the shepherd and the woman – invites others to share in his joy of recovery; “*for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!*” (15:24).

While this story is known as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” its central figure is the father, who sees something in his wayward son that others fail to recognize. He may have been dismissed as a failure, an embarrassment, and a disappointment to others who witnesses his homecoming, but in the eyes of his father he was the child who the father loved fully and unconditionally – the love that God has for us, the grace that is truly amazing because it always looks upon us as precious even if others see no worth or value in us.

- “At the center of Jesus’ parables of grace stands a God who takes the initiative toward us: a lovesick father who runs to meet the prodigal, a landlord who cancels a debt too large for any servant to reimburse, an employer who pays eleventh-hour workers the same as the first-hour crew, a banquet-giver who goes out to the highways and byways in search of undeserving guests.” – Philip Yancey.

Jesus did not look upon his dinner guests as persons who decisions and actions made them unworthy of love and acceptance, but as persons who had become lost but were still worthy of being found. His call to repentance was not so that they might pay for their indiscretions, but that they might “*return to the LORD your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love*” (Joel 2:13). While the onlookers saw them as having little value, to Jesus they were so precious that he was willing to give his life “*in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.*” (*Small Catechism*).

- “When Jesus loved a guilt-laden person and helped him, he saw in him an erring child of God. He saw in him a human being whom his Father loved and grieved over because he was going wrong. He saw him as God originally designed and meant him to be, and therefore he saw through the surface layer of grime and dirt to the real man underneath. Jesus did not *identify* the person with his sin, but rather saw in this sin something alien, something that really did not belong to him, something that merely chained and mastered him and from which he would free him and bring him back to his real self. Jesus was able to love men because he loved them right through the layer of mud.” – Helmut Thielicke.

I probably wouldn’t have paid any attention to that handkerchief that I found under a pew and put into the lost and box – and I certainly wouldn’t remember it all these years later – had it not been for the joy of recovery I witnessed in the woman who rejoiced when she found this precious family heirloom. It is a reminder that while some things may be of little value to some, they are most precious to others. More importantly, it reminds us that no matter how others may see us, we are holy and precious in the eyes of God, who rejoices every time someone who once was lost is found through the “amazing grace” that is ours in Jesus Christ, the grace that “*has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.*” Amen.