

"Lost and Found: In the World and in the Church"

Luke 15:1-10

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ,

The Gospel Reading for this day is the sermon text. Please listen to it once more and the words which follow under the theme of Lost and Found: In The World and In The Church.

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Him. And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." So He told them this parable: "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which 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 which was lost.' 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. Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

I want you to try to understand the events of this text from my point of view. It all began when I just sort of wandered away without making any sort of decision to do so. It was all gradual as I strayed a few steps from the rest of the flock - munching on grass here and noticing a bit of juicy grass over there. At first I noticed that the others were congregating together a ways away from me, but I knew that I had not really separated myself from them. I could always go back at any time. The Good Shepherd didn't need to worry about me. I could handle it.

Then I got further occupied with myself and my thoughts, my pleasures and my priorities, my plans and my purposes. Of course, that takes time and concentration and effort -- time away from where I had once been with all those other sheep and with the Good Shepherd (though at the time, I hardly thought Him to be good. Actually, the longer I stayed away and the farther I strayed, the more He seemed to be a Master Rule-Maker and Mr. Fun-Spoiler). Anyway, my activities and pursuits also took concentration away from what I had once been hearing from that Big Boss Man and what the other sheep heard, believed and did. It also took effort. I worked at being a sheep with my own agenda.

Long hours were spent working my way from one field to the next, over the hills and through valleys. And while I could no longer see the congregation from where I was, I knew the general direction and was convinced I could find my way back any time I wanted.

Then came my day of trouble. As you know, such a day comes for all sheep and in that, I am no exception. For a sheep, it could have been an attack by a predator walking about seeking

someone to devour - the vicious beast that stalks in secret or the wolf in sheep's clothing who casually walks up and traps. It might have been sheep's disease ... an inherited physical condition that results in a slow deterioration with many hurts, pains, suffering, and departure from this world, or it may be an unannounced, sudden, instant death. As you might imagine, it can be quite scary. There is also Mad Sheep's Disease ... a mental or emotional state that immobilizes the thought processes and saps the soul of hope and peace.

Anyway, as I said, my day of trouble came and along with it, pain, sorrow, anguish and fear that I never knew existed. I was easy prey for anyone and about to be devoured. Oh, I recalled the congregation and the Shepherd, but had no idea where they were ... no knowledge of where I might go, if indeed, I could move from my spot in the valley of the shadow of death. I was lost ... absolutely lost. All I could do was bleat like a lost sheep.

My only hope was to be found. But think about it. Why would anyone find me? Why would anyone look for me? Who would go out and sacrifice the time and the effort to make a search for a lost sheep who carelessly, thoughtlessly and purposely wandered away, and who would care enough for me to seek me in this land of thorns and thistles? In my state of mind at the time, I could only think of one who could find me ... the one I used to know as the Good Shepherd. But why would He seek me?

I thought there could be only one reason ... vengeance - to spy me out, to find me and to make me pay for what I had done. He would really let me know what my day of trouble was all about.

So, when I saw Him come over the rise and into the same valley of death that I was in, I was filled with horrid fear once again. I sought to hide from Him as did the first sheep, the one named Adam, who covered his shame with an apron of leaves and hid in Paradise when he heard the footsteps approaching him. But the Master knew where to look and there was no hiding from Him. He found me, walked to me, bent way down to me, and to my amazement, said, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name; you are Mine."

He had not come to me as the Rule-Maker, but as the Law-Fulfiller. This was the Good Shepherd Who came in grace and truth to bind up the broken-hearted and to grant release to those held captive. His nail-pierced hands lifted me up from a certain death and hoisted me high into the air. In a resurrection that, at the same time crushed and enlivened me, He shouldered me, rejoiced and set off to return me to the others in the flock. He bore me and in doing so, bore all my burdens as well, just as one might shoulder the burden of a cross. I understood that I had been restored to Him and He rejoiced in that restoration.

But there was more. As I rode on the Big Man's broad shoulders it was, I'll admit, more than a bit scary. He was tall and it was a long way to the ground below. If He had dropped me, I would have most certainly have died, being dashed upon the jagged rocks below. However, His deep voice assured me, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give

them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, Who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are One."

I must tell you it was a breath-taking ride. I was also scared because I wondered what the other sheep would think of me, what they might say to me, how they would treat me, and whether or not I would be accepted into the flock once more. As we drew near the congregating flock, they all turned to us... their eyes focusing on me and on the Good Shepherd Who was carrying me back home. The Master spoke to His congregation: "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost." To my further amazement, they rejoiced at my return with the voices of angels and archangels and all the company of heaven joined in the joyful refrain.

Dear people of God, Jesus declares, "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." Now that may indeed be an account of your life with God and that you are here in His Church once more after having been shouldered by the Lord who, with rejoicing of His own and that of the congregation, restores the lost to Himself and His Church. If so, it should move you to give hearty and humble thanks to God for His undeserved grace. It should also give you hope that those family members of yours who have wandered away from the Lord still have time to repent, believe and be restored to the Lord and His Church. That is the oft-repeated story of Lost and Found: In The World. That's also the first part of the sermon.

But perhaps you are one of those blessed people who have never wandered away from the Lord God and His Church. It might be that this church building, or one very much like it, has always been the House of God where you have been raised in the faith. Have you always been here in this House? If so, then perhaps yours is the story of ... Lost and Found: In the Church.

Jesus tells of a loss that occurred, not out in the wilderness of the world, but a loss in a house. A woman has ten valuable coins ... each one quite precious to her. However, in the shades and shadows of the house, one coin is lost ... a member of the whole group has become lost in the house. Though still in the church, one member is lost. In order to find the precious lost, the woman lights a lamp. The light from the lamp, just like the light from the Word of God, is needed in order to find the lost one.

The light of God's Word works in two ways ... first to expose the sinner and the sin. We call that the second use of the Law, to serve as a mirror to show us our sin ... to convict and to convince the one lost in church that he or she is a sinner, has been separated from the one, holy, Christian Church, and if left in that condition, would be lost forever. The other way that the Lamp of God's Word works is as a gracious purging ... a cleansing that removes our sin from us as far as the east is from the west. This is the Good News that the Lord our God wants everyone to hear about in the world and everyone to hear again and again in His Church.

Even though you may have been a faithful church member all your life, you still need to hear this two-fold message of God's Word. Your sins condemn you. You hear the message that you have become lost by your own disobedience and self-centered living. And you know it's true. But you also hear the cleansing and forgiving message of the Gospel – that you have been found by a Savior who has suffered and died for those very sins that separated you from God!

Yes, the woman, in the midst of her search in the house, found the lost coin. As a result, she calls for her friends and neighbors to congregate in her house. When they do, she invites them to join her in the day of gladness. She says, "rejoice with me, because I have found the coin that I lost!"

And following His telling of this story, Jesus declares, In the same way, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Our Lord's actions and practice were completely consistent with the truth that He taught, and the confession that He declared. In doing so, tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Him. Jesus did not turn them away. While they rejoiced in being at table with the Lord God, the legalists who had the Word in their possession and who were the leaders in the Church grumbled. The Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them."

And you know what, dear people? The Pharisees and the scribes were right! They were absolutely correct in what they had declared. This Jesus receives sinners and eats with us. By the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word, we have been invited and drawn near to believe, teach and confess that the King of kings and the Lord of lords receives sinners and eats with us. This the one Gospel that can truly be called "good news".

So may the God of peace, Who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the Blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in you that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ; to Whom be glory for ever and ever. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.