

Sermon for the Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 15, 2013
Rev'd Mark B. Stirdivant, Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Kansas City, Missouri

✧ sdg ✧

There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, that is, who is constantly repenting throughout one's life, turning back from the sin that constantly is attacking. Congratulations! Jesus is here talking about you personally.

You see, Jesus likes to use common, everyday Words when He speaks to us. Jesus likes common Words because He wants us to understand His thoughts clearly and know His ways fully. Luke chapter 15 is a good example of our Lord's simple speech. We may not have met too many shepherds in our everyday experience, but every preschooler can tell you what a sheep is. So, too, with the coin: who among us has not felt that surge of urgency that starts in the pit of your stomach once we realized we lost some amount of money? Who would not take time to look for it again? Jesus uses coins and sheep and other common images because He wants us to understand an important spiritual truth, and avoid all the complex mental categories altogether. Eternal life may be greater than anything we can think of, but you can, in fact, think of it in terms of everyday experiences.

Yet even when Jesus speaks with such simplicity as you just heard today, always be ready for something you did not expect. He will use words that are easy to understand, but what He says will seem to be the total opposite of the way we naturally think. We will hear His Word, clear as a bell, and wonder, why would Jesus say that? Why, for instance, would He make Himself like a shepherd who

chases down one, single, stray sheep—and leaves the 99 others all alone! That's totally insane!

Then, He says that there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. More insanity! I thought God was pleased with righteousness in His people. Didn't His Ten Commandments require us to be righteous persons? But what would be the use of working so hard to be a righteous person, when that would be no great cause for celebration among the angels, after all?

Part of the misunderstanding is this. When you and I think and speak of "righteous people," we usually mean those people who go to church every Sunday to receive God's gift of righteousness from Jesus, who is here today to hand it out. To be sure, there are many places in God's Bible that speak of righteousness in that manner (for example, Psalm 118:20, Matthew 25:46, and Hebrews 11:4). But that is not how Jesus uses the phrase "righteous persons" in today's Gospel! Jesus actually turns things upside down in Luke 15. Surprisingly, Jesus says "righteous persons" today actually to speak about unbelievers, impenitent people, those who have no desire to hear God's Word. How do I know this? Earlier in St. Luke's book, Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). See? If you're "righteous" according to this other definition, Jesus says, No need to bother.

What is a “righteous person,” in this surprising and unusual way that Jesus uses? A so-called “righteous person” is one who has no interest in Jesus; a person who sees in himself no sins that need repentance; actually, this is a “self-righteous” person who does not feel lost and in need of being found. According to the surprising and unusual way Jesus uses the phrase, a “righteous person” is that person who refuses God’s Word and rejects His gift of faith. You are not that guy, are you? Jesus puts you in another category.

It is also a surprising and unusual manner when He describes you and me as lost sheep and lost coins. Generally, you and I think of “the lost” as those people who are still outside the church, those who have not yet been gathered into Christ’s salvation. We generally think of “the lost” only as those unbelievers whom we need to evangelize and get them to come to church. But Jesus has turned things upside down. In an unusual, even surprising manner, Jesus here defines the lost as all those who need Jesus, including those who have gathered in the presence of the Lord; even those who want to hear Jesus’ Words are “the lost.” After all, what prompted Jesus to tell the two parables we have here? Luke started by saying: Now the tax collectors and sinners were all DRAWING NEAR TO HEAR JESUS.

Knowing the surprising way Jesus speaks of things for you in today’s Gospel, listen again to what Jesus says for your comfort and joy: 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.” 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 that I had lost.” Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Understand from today’s Gospel the diligence and faithfulness of your Lord! By turning things upside down—by calling you and all His Christians “lost sheep” and “lost coins”—Jesus is NOT condemning you and He is NOT calling you unbelievers. By turning things upside down—by calling you and all His Christians “lost sheep” and “lost coins”—Jesus is helping you better see in clear, understandable words what He continually does for you through His grace and by His mercy. According to the two parables you heard today,

Jesus is your Good Shepherd who rejoices to carry you upon His shoulders and who feels great delight that He has now found you and gathered you safely into His holy Church. Jesus then commands His angels, “Rejoice with Me, for I have found My sheep that was lost.”

Jesus then compares Himself to a careful and painstaking woman who happily finds you laying helplessly in the dust, who sweeps through sand in a mud-hut in His sincere earnestness to have you, and who attaches great value to you. “Rejoice with Me,” says the Lord to His heavenly host, “for I have found the coin that I had lost.” And all you had to say was, Lord, have mercy on me, a poor miserable sinner. I need help, and you are the only one who can help me. I thank You, dear Savior, for sweeping through Your dusty world just to find me.

Take comfort in these Words, Christians! Return frequently to the Gospel! Each day as you rise and go your way, thank your Father in heaven that you ride through your daily life like a found lamb upon the strong and broad shoulders of Christ, your Good Shepherd. As you heard Jesus explain in today’s Gospel, “When He has found His Sheep, He lays it on His shoulders.” Each night as you lay down to rest, know that you sleep securely in the coin-purse of your Lord, who has diligently sought and found you through the light of His Word. Thus says the Lord, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners—that is, lost sheep and lost coins—to repentance” (Luke 5:32). Be glad, therefore, that you are a sinner in need of repentance. The sinfulness that you feel in yourself is good and faithful proof that Jesus came especially for you!

What is that repentance into which He has called you? Remember, it’s ongoing action, a constant turning away from the sin that is always trying to get back into your life, a struggle that you need to endure in this life,

or else you will end up being one of those so-called “righteous persons” who end up convincing themselves that they don’t need a constant hard look at their lives in light of God’s Word and the Ten Commandments. You need to realize that forgiveness is not a one-time thing in your life, but a constant life-breath necessity.

That’s another surprise that came from Jesus that you weren’t expecting—you shall never escape your sinfulness, so long as your life on earth endures, and your Savior says, that’s a beautiful thing for you. He engaged in His insane, totally illogical mission to rescue you and bring you home to Him forever. That’s something to make you rejoice. Don’t stop being a sinner! Because at the very moment you and I stop being sinners, that’s when we stop needing Jesus. Stated another way, It is a good and blessed thing to be that “one sinner who is continually repenting” because hell is full of so-called “righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Rejoice in your sinfulness, dear children of God, because it is forgiven in Christ! Gladly take your place among “the tax collectors and sinners who were all drawing near to hear Jesus.” There is no better place to be! Jesus says today about you, now that He has found you and gathered you in:

There will be more joy in heaven before the angels of God over one sinner who is continually repenting than over ninety-nine so-called righteous persons who claim to have no need for repentance.

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son
and of the Holy Spirit.