

“Seeking the Lost”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 7, 2025

Sacrament of Holy Communion

I Timothy 1:12-16

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Luke 15:1-10

A couple of summers ago, Brenda and I had the opportunity to visit the French Alps. One morning, we rode the tram up the mountain, climbing thousands of vertical feet in mere minutes, from the warm valley below to the snow-capped peaks above. The scenery was truly majestic. And yet, one of our fellow travelers in the gondola, an employee at the mountain, was reading a book. Apparently, he had seen these views so often that they had become routine.

For frequent readers of and listeners to the gospels, the words of these parables of Jesus can likewise grow to appear commonplace. We can sometimes come to believe that we have heard and understand all there is to know about the tales of the Good Samaritan or the Rich Young Ruler, the mustard seed and the leavening yeast.

Here, we are told that the tax collectors and sinners are being drawn to Jesus which causes the Pharisees and scribes to grumble. Jesus speaks to this latter group of people who question and resent his inclusive welcome to all; especially the former, whose actions place them outside the expected realm of God’s favor. And yet, we may be so accustomed to the idea that God searches for and saves the lost that we fail to spot in them the power of salvation and the element of surprise.

Modern-day congregations may stumble over this term “sinner,” especially those who are steeped in Christian doctrine. *Aren’t we all sinners?* some may protest. Well, not in Luke’s world where some people so habitually transgressed the ways of God that they were commonly regarded as sinners in need of repentance. But, others do not. Tax collectors were corrupt, dishonest, and colluders with the Empire; people who look out only for their own interests. The religious leaders, on the other hand, followed the Jewish laws faithfully and fully. Jesus makes a clear distinction between those sinners who repent and change their

ways and “the righteous who have no need of repentance.” And here lies the cutting edge of the parables: Jesus chooses to embrace the very people that the rest of religious society chooses to reject.¹

Both of these short parables are best characterized by their action words: the shepherd goes after the one lost sheep, finds it, and lays it on his shoulders. The woman lights a lamp, sweeps the house, and searches carefully until the single lost coin is found. So valuable is what was lost to them that all the practicalities of responsible stewardship seem to go out the window. *What about the other ninety-nine sheep that are left unprotected?* we might wonder. Would it make a difference if the shepherd only had care of fifty or ten or two? Likewise, *is one coin worth such effort?* we might ask, even if it is worth a day’s wages. Would the woman’s actions change if she had possessed fifty or a hundred or more?

The emphasis seems not to be on a calculation of how much each person possesses, but on the mere fact that one has been lost. If, indeed, the character of the searcher is intended to represent that of God, then Jesus is affirming the intrinsic worth to God of each and every individual – the sinners and the righteous alike.

To drive this point home, Jesus recounts how both the shepherd and the woman, when they have found what has been lost, call up their friends and neighbors to come and rejoice with them. The implication is that each is planning a party which would have included a meal; quite possibly spending far more on the celebration than the value of what was recovered.

Both parables conclude with an additional comment about there being joy in heaven – or in the presence of the angels of God - over one sinner who repents. The earthly parties – these feasts to which neighbors and friends have been invited – seem to represent glimpses into the ways of the divine; opportunities we are given to witness our prayers of “on earth as it is in heaven” be answered.

And this is precisely what the Pharisees and scribes are complaining about: Jesus eating with the sinners and tax collectors. Not only is he – as their table guest – potentially violating vital dietary laws, but his attention is also being diverted away from seemingly more important people and things. Where is his sense of

¹ Greg Carey from *WorkingPreacher.com*

responsible stewardship? Has he conducted a proper cost-benefit analysis? And, if he really is from God, what about the ninety-nine – the ones who did not wander away – or the other coins in the coffer that he is choosing to leave unprotected?

In our lives – in the church and beyond – we are constantly being asked to make such calculations. How much time and attention do we give to the one – whether it's a person or a thing, an organization or a cause – as opposed to the many? Where are the places or actions that we would consider unwise or unproductive to go or to pursue as a waste of our time and effort? Maybe for us it is not in sharing a table with the unsavory and undeserving, but, instead, a faith or particular people-group that appears unwelcome to us; or possibly a neighborhood or nation that seems not to be deserving of our help.

Indeed, we are all sinners, but sometimes we still tend to imagine others as being beyond the reach of God's grace. For some, that may be the presently or formerly incarcerated, or migrants here without legal status, or members of queer or trans communities. We might think of people who labor in unseemly occupations or who abuse our systems of social support. Any or all of these – it may be hard for us to admit – might seem to threaten us or qualify as a lost cause.

The theological implication of these parables – of connecting God with these actions of the shepherd and the woman – is that our Lord is a seeker who will never tire of searching and then experiences joy and fosters celebration when the lost is found.²

In the parable that follows these two, and that we will look at more deeply next Sunday – the Prodigal, the story of a Father and his two sons – this theme of celebration will be explored in greater detail. There, we will encounter the reaction of the older, dutiful son when his younger, squandering brother is welcomed home. In an apt visual metaphor, the story concludes with the elder brother standing outside of the celebration, and we are left to wonder whether he will choose to go in.

Last week, we were met with the news that our year-long discernment process about a potential reunion with our friends and neighbors at Bainbridge United Church of Christ would not be moving forward. The leaders of our two

² Kendra Mohn, "Parables for Today"

congregations – after worshipping and sharing in fellowship together and examining beliefs and polity, property and finance situations – settled on this course of action for this particular moment and situation. For those of us who had imagined a future of unity, shared mission, and broader identity, this alternate outcome has resulted, I am sure, in a number of all-too-human responses and emotions.

What reassures me, in this tenuous moment, is that I find – in this set of three parables that Jesus shares – a core message about how God diligently searches for, finds, and celebrates the return of what was lost. While we can prepare ourselves and our communities for that which God brings in, ultimately the burden of recovery and restoration is not solely ours. What we do receive is the constant invitation to come in and experience the joy that is prepared for us.

We live in a world that is divided: where nations are at war, where political rhetoric is often mean-spirited, where the few possess much and the many are left wanting, where neither privileges nor burdens are shared equally. And while there is much for us to give, and to learn, and to do, Jesus offers a radical invitation to all people to come sit at the table, to repent and change their ways, to become better at welcoming, loving, and accepting others.

What our Lord seems to make clear – when we try to listen to his words with fresh ears and see the world around us with open eyes – is that there is room at the table for everyone; and, even more importantly, that there is a seat for each and every one. All possess worth and value; none are beyond the scope of God's relentless searching. And so, let us go and tell our friends and neighbors the good news of God's amazing grace; let us be people who – like the shepherd and the woman in the parable – reflect this divine tenacity of seeking out the lost – for the celebration that will one day ensue is well-worth the cost. Thanks be to God. Amen.