

THE JOY OF THE LOST FOUND

Luke 15:1-10; Proper 19C-Pentecost 14C; September 13-14, 2025

Do you remember the Old Testament account of Jonah? The first thing that usually comes to mind is how Jonah was swallowed by a fish for three days before being vomited out alive on dry land. That's truly memorable, but the point of the story is that God wanted Jonah to go to Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, to call them to repentance, and the "fish story" detour only happened because Jonah didn't want to go.

After Jonah got spit out by the fish, he went to Nineveh and called them to repentance. There Jonah expected that God's wrath would rain down from heaven and destroy those people because they would not repent, but that's not what happened. All the people, from the king down to the lowest citizen, actually listened to God's Word through Jonah and repented of their sins. This made Jonah mad at God, and he complained that he went all that way only to see God being gracious and merciful to Israel's enemies, forgiving their sins.

God then caused a plant to grow up and shade Jonah from the blazing sun as he waited outside Nineveh, which Jonah was glad about. But then God caused that plant to die so Jonah was scorched by a hot sun and wind, and he was angry again, this time about the plant. God's lesson to him was that Jonah should have had pity on the 120,000 residents of Nineveh, not the plant that died. Jonah cared more about the plant, which had brought him physical relief, than for the people of Nineveh who would have all died. He should not have grumbled, but rejoiced when they repented and God forgave their sins.

When God's Son, Jesus Christ, came preaching repentance, a similar, unexpected thing happened. Tax collectors, notorious sinners in those days, and other sinners, repented and became Jesus' disciples. Pharisees and scribes, well-known for their strict obedience to God's laws, grumbled at this, saying, "**This man [Jesus] receives sinners and eats with them.**" This led Jesus to tell three parables about repentance and forgiveness, two of which we heard today, the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin (the third is the parable of the Prodigal/Lost Son).

My sermon theme today from these parables is “The Joy of the Lost Found.” This joy Jesus that speaks about is in stark contrast to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes. When the shepherd finds his lost sheep, Jesus says, **“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.”** And when the woman finds her lost coin, **“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.”** Grumbling is not the proper response to sinners repenting; joy is.

To understand why joy is the proper response we need to understand what Jesus means in these parables by being “lost.” To be lost is to be caught up in sin and unbelief. A sheep that wanders away from the shepherd, or a coin lost, is a person who decides to go his or her own way, sinning against God and others, not repenting of that sin, maybe to the point of losing faith in Jesus.

This is serious! Someone who continues to be lost in sin and unbelief and then dies – though it is not spelled out in these parables – will spend forever in hell. St. Paul warns us today in 1 Timothy: **“the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine”** (1:8b-10). If we continue in these and other sins and refuse to repent of them, we are lost. If we refuse to turn away from our sins with shame and sorrow, not turning to God for mercy in Christ, we are lost.

Jesus came **to seek and to save the lost** (Lk 19:10). Jesus is like that shepherd who seeks his lost sheep until it is found. Jesus is like that woman who searched diligently until she found her lost coin. Eternal souls are at stake when someone is lost in sin and unbelief. There shouldn't be any grumbling when one of these is found repenting of sins and is brought back into God's kingdom

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

In the last couple of weeks our nation has experienced the tragic murder and assassination of children and adults. In these recent events, it has been shocking to hear some in media and politics blame the victims because of their beliefs, implying that the victims got what they deserved. It is self-righteous to think that those who do not believe like you don't deserve protection from violence. This is like Jonah outside of Nineveh waiting and hoping for death to come down on those people. The self-righteous think their enemies don't deserve to live, and when they die violently, gleefully think, "They finally got what they deserved."

This should never be the case, no matter who it is being murdered or assaulted. All of us need to be careful not to think of those who disagree with us as our enemies who need to be taken out by force and violence, if necessary. To have such hateful thoughts toward others makes us murderers, as John wrote in his First Epistle, "**Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him**" (3:15).

In Ezekiel 33, the chapter before our Old Testament Reading today, God says, "**As I live, declares the LORD GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?**" (33:11). God is being patient with sinners. This is why He has not yet come in glory to destroy this sinful world. He wants to give us time to repent, which would bring great joy to Him.

This is the first joy of the lost found: God's joy. God rejoices when sinners turn from their sins, repenting and believing in Jesus for their forgiveness. The Jewish circumlocution for God's rejoicing is, "**there is joy in heaven**" and "**before the angels of God.**" When the Good Shepherd finds His lost, sinful, wandering sheep, God rejoices. This does not give us license to sin all the more because, you know, God rejoices over sinners forgiven. No, we should flee from what tempts us to sin and resist the devil, and when we fall into sin, it should grieve us greatly. When we realized our sinfulness, we should remember even more God's love and mercy for us in Jesus, who said of Himself, "**The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.**" "*Jesus, sinners, doth receive*" (LSB 609).

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

That brings us to the second joy of the lost found: the joy in those lost sheep found by Jesus and returned to His sheepfold. The tax collectors and sinners whom Jesus received and ate with experienced that joy. They had been excluded and rejected by others as too sinful to be saved until Jesus came and preached the Gospel to them. What joy they must have felt when they heard that God loved them and welcomed them as His children through faith in Jesus.

Most of us have been Christians for as long as we can remember. That can cause us to become “ho hum” about faith and forgiveness, but it shouldn’t. We are one with the tax collectors and sinners Jesus received and ate with. If we no longer share their joy, we need to pray the words of Psalm 51, **“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me... Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation, and uphold me with Thy free spirit”** (51:10, 12).

The Pharisees and scribes grumbled at Jesus for receiving sinners and eating with them, treating them as acceptable to God. This reminds us of the third joy of the lost found: the Church’s joy at sinners repenting and being forgiven. There are no perfect people in the Church, only sinners, of which we all are examples. We should not look down upon other sinners whom God brings into His Church. There is no one “out there” whom God does not want as His own through repentance and faith in Jesus. God **wants all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth** (1 Tim 2:4).

We are to **love our enemies and do good to those who hate us** (Lk 6:27). And when they repent of their sins and come to faith in Jesus by the working of the Holy Spirit when we speak God’s Word of law and gospel to them, we rejoice that God has received them with us.

God rejoices when the lost are found. The lost rejoice at being found and forgiven. Let us in the Church rejoice with them and God. Amen.