

THE TEXT

¹Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were drawing near to Jesus to hear Him. ²And both the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were murmuring and saying “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” ³And Jesus told them this parable, saying ⁴“What one of you having a hundred sheep and having lost one of them, does not leave behind the ninety-nine in the desert and pursues the one being lost, until he finds it? ⁵And finding it, he lays it upon his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And coming to the house he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them ‘Rejoice with me! For I found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷I say to you that in the same way, there will be joy in heaven over one sinner repenting than the ninety-nine righteous who have no need to repent. ⁸Or what woman, having ten coins, if she has lost one, does not light a candle and sweeps the house and carefully seeks until she has found it.” ⁹And having found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying ‘Rejoice with me, because I found the coin which I lost.’ ¹⁰In the same way, I tell you there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

SERMON

Most of us like to hear a good story, right? You might remember hearing a favourite story that your parents, grandparents or primary school teacher read to you. Most of us might even say that we enjoy telling a good story too. As parents and grandparents, you might recall the joy of reading your children or grandchildren their favourite story, and how they enjoyed hearing you read it.

Story telling captures our attention, and engages our imagination. Stories help us picture another reality, so that we hear not only with our ears, but with our eyes and minds, visualising the scenery, characters and plot, as if we were there ourselves.

Jesus told many stories. These stories are called parables, and the purpose of Jesus’ parables was to tell stories using common earthly realities that people were familiar with, to teach about what the Kingdom of God is like—how God rules on earth with his grace, through Jesus.

The context of the two stories that Jesus tells in today’s reading is that the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled against him, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” The tax collectors and sinners represented all of those who in the eyes of society and of the religious community were undesirable and immoral; those of dubious character—those who did not present with the same observable external righteousness and holiness of the supposedly religious elite of the day—the Pharisees and scribes. A modern day equivalent would be the drug addicts, the alcoholics, the single mothers, the strippers and prostitutes.

The Pharisees and Scribes saw themselves as so much more acceptable to God than others, because they thought that religious performance and morality merited God’s favour. They shunned the so-called sinners and tax collectors; frowning upon them as undeserving of any favour from God. Any self-respecting and God-fearing teacher should have nothing to do with them, other than to judge them and send them away. That is why Israel’s religious leaders of the day frowned upon Jesus and rejected his ministry, because he welcomed sinners and tax collectors making himself unclean—and surely God wouldn’t have a bar of that!

So Jesus tells these stories—to teach what God is *really* like.

“What one of you having a hundred sheep and having lost one of them, does not leave behind the ninety-nine in the desert and pursues the one being lost, until he finds it? And finding it, he lays it upon his shoulders, rejoicing.

Sheep are very valuable—just look at the price of a tray of lamb chops at the supermarket! A whole lamb is worth even more of course, and would have been especially valuable to ancient agricultural societies, which is why there were shepherds in the first place. A shepherd doing a headcount of

their flock, who discovered that he was one short, wouldn't just pass it off without a care. Instead, they would go searching for the lost sheep, because it was theirs, and it was valuable to them. Imagine if that was you—you wouldn't want your sheep to have been stolen, or left exposed and come to grief to predators—you would look for it until you found it, and when you found it you would bring it back, rejoicing.

Jesus' next parable is of the woman who has lost a coin. Her 10 coins probably represent her life savings. Those coins, then, represent not just a monetary value, but her future security and livelihood. Losing one tenth of our life savings would be very significant. We can picture this woman, quite concerned and anxious, lighting a candle, looking under the table, looking in the dark corners, turning the house upside down, sweeping the floor to see if the coin has got caught in the cracks. Who of us hasn't been in a situation like that, having misplaced keys or credit card, or lost an ear ring or wedding ring? We can imagine her, searching carefully and thoroughly, until she finds it—and what rejoicing when she does!

The shepherd and the woman are the central figures of both stories. The action is all on them, as they seek that which is lost. They search for the sheep and coin because they *belong* to them, and they are valuable to them, so they search *until* they are found. Through these characters, Jesus shows that God is a searching God, seeking to save that which is lost, because they belong to him and are incredibly valuable to him. Indeed Jesus is himself the Messiah who comes to seek and save the lost sheep of Israel. He is the Good Shepherd who restores wandering sheep to God. These are pictures of how each person is of immense worth to God.

What the Pharisees failed to understand is that nobody can achieve righteousness and receive eternal favour from God. The sheep has nothing to offer to earn or deserve its rescue, just like the 'sinners' who came to Jesus. The coin is an inanimate object. It does not even know it is lost, much like the Pharisees protesting against Jesus.

God needs to come to us, and give us his righteousness. That is so because of the human nature we are all born with. In today's Psalm the Psalmist declares that no one seeks God—that is, no one seeks the one true God as revealed in the scriptures or knows him by their own strength. They seek God in many other things; gods of their own making, worshipping and serving creatures rather than the Creator, and even making gods of themselves—pleasures and lifestyle, and so on. But no one by their own natural resources—human will, desire or effort—can come to Jesus or know him as Lord and saviour. All people are sinners and tax collectors as it were, no matter how much work they put into their righteous exteriors.

Instead God is patient and gracious in searching for the lost, because everyone needs his grace—and there is great rejoicing in heaven whenever anyone repents, by turning to Jesus. In the stories the shepherd and woman call together their friends and neighbours—a picture of the angels in heaven—inviting them to join in rejoicing over the lost that was found.

Did you know that there is great rejoicing in heaven over you!

For we were once lost, separated from God because of sin. But it was when we were unable to seek and find God that he sought after, and found us. Heaven's rescue search for you began when God sent his Son into the world. He found you at the font where you were baptised in his name to belong to him forever. And when you were baptised you received the Holy Spirit. And when you hear God's word, and when you come to the Lord's Table you continue to receive the Holy Spirit, who shows you Jesus, who, true God from all eternity, was born in human flesh to lay down his life on the Cross to save the world. The Holy Spirit teaches you that your Father in heaven loves you so much, and so longed for you to know him and his love, that he sent you Jesus to purchase you as his own by his precious blood.

It is not any effort on your part that makes you pleasing to God. It is simply Jesus who makes you

pleasing to God. He has washed away all your sin and covered your shame over with his own righteousness, because you are valuable to him.

There are so many out there who don't think they have any worth or value, much less in God's sight. There are so many out there who think: 'God wouldn't ever take notice of me', or 'God doesn't hear me', or 'God wouldn't forgive me' or 'couldn't possibly love me, because my performance isn't good enough'...and sometimes we can fall to the Devil's temptation to think that way too, about ourselves and others.

If only others could hear these stories of grace, and love and welcome by God through Jesus his Son!

Beginning on October 16th there will be a series of reflecting on Jesus' parables, to grow in our understanding of them, to grow in our faith, but also with the purpose of equipping us to tell these stories to others—"How God's stories help us to tell God's story."

May God grant us the opportunities to share his stories with others. You see, these parables don't only teach us about the extravagant grace of God and his undeserved love that he offers in Jesus as a free gift. As we tell the stories, the master story teller, Jesus, is present with us, himself telling the story of how he welcomes sinners and showers divine grace on them. These stories are the very means by which God goes to work to create faith in the hearts of the hearers, bringing them into a new, unseen reality of God's Kingdom where he welcomes sinners with grace and mercy. The Pharisees' complaints about Jesus were actually the truth! Jesus does welcome sinners! He, the righteous One, gave his life for the unrighteous. He, the holy One, made himself unholy by taking upon himself their sin, guilt and shame.

May these people hear and believe—and may this congregation be filled with tax collectors and sinners—people knowing their guilt, people ashamed of their past, people spurned and cast out by the world. May this congregation burst to the seams with people such as these, that they might see and know a God who receives sinners; a God who loves and welcomes; a God who searches for, and saves the lost.

And for every sinner who repents, there will be rejoicing in heaven, just as there is rejoicing in heaven over you. Amen!