

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 19)  
St. Luke 15:1-10; Ezekiel 34:11-24

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen

"This man receives sinners and eats with them," His detractors cried. "This man, claiming to be holy, claiming to be sent from God in Heaven, claiming to be the Son of God, eats with the most vile and detestable and unholy lot on earth. How can one so holy deign to dwell among and associate with the unholy? It's unheard of. It's reprehensible. It's sacrilegious."

So, Jesus compares his listeners to shepherds. These detractors, these self-righteous lawyers, these scribes and pharisees are asked, "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?" Jesus compared them to shepherds, once a highly respected position, which had become looked down upon as the "*am-ha-arets*," the "people of the land"—the unclean and sinners. Furthermore, the shepherd has lost a sheep...how irresponsible.

On top of that, this shepherd left the 99 to find the lost one. He is so irresponsible to lose one and compounds that irresponsibility by leaving the herd to find a single wanderer. Is there such a thing as the needs of the one outweighing the needs of the many?

So, Jesus compared his listeners to a poor woman whose only monetary possession is 10 coins, the wages for 10 days work. "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?" She was so poor, she had to be an old servant woman, another example of the "*am-ha-arets*," the people of the land. And she was so careless to have lost a day's wages.

On top of that, this careless woman compounded her carelessness by forgetting about the other nine day's wages to find the one. Furthermore, when she finds it, she throws a party with her friends, probably spending more than a single day's wages—the amount that was originally lost. Can there be so much joy over the recovery of something so small and insignificant?

Well, is there? Can there be?

Is there such a thing as the needs of the one outweighing the needs of the many? To answer that, I remind you of another time when Jesus was "accused" of unlawful association. He called Levi, St. Matthew, the tax collector to follow Him—to be His disciple. Levi invited Him over for dinner, and Jesus went and ate. The scribes and Pharisees asked, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." (cf. Luke 5:2-32)

So, maybe Jesus was comparing the scribes and Pharisees to the 99 sheep. After all, the shepherd leaves them to go find the one needing to be brought back into the fold. And when the shepherd finds it, he puts it on his shoulders and carries it **home** where he calls together his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him. He does not return to the pasture, to the other 99 sheep. They are not mentioned again except in this context: "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."

In light of today's Old Testament lesson, it would certainly seem the 99 sheep are representative of the scribes and Pharisees, the self-righteous and unrepentant. There, in Ezekiel 34, God says,

As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your

feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?" Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: "Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep.

He will judge between sheep and sheep. He will discern between the 99 righteous sheep who need no repentance and the one who does. How? The prophet continued,

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

He will establish His own shepherd over them, One from the line of David, One Who will judge between the 99 and the one, and He will be the God of the one.

Now, it has often been said, and it is true, that there are no 99 people who are just and need no repentance. No, there is not even one. These 99 just people who need no repentance are 99 people who are just in their own sight and see no need in themselves to repent. They are self-righteous. These 99 sheep see no need for the shepherd; they can get along just fine without them. Likewise, 99 self-righteous people see, any self-righteous person sees, no need for the Good Shepherd—for a Savior—they believe they are good enough without Him.

These are not simply scribes and Pharisees. There are myriad people with myriad labels who justify themselves before the face of God, willfully and unwillfully. From among those who outright reject and deny the Savior, and even from among those who call themselves Christians. And I bet there everyone in here can find and have found one sin or another to justify rather than confess.

But, that one who wanders off, that sinner and tax collector, that member of the "*am-ha-arets*" who has no righteousness in himself and sees it—to this one does the Good Shepherd run after, and when He finds it, He places it on His shoulders and bears it home. There is an image of burden here, and one which you should not overlook. There is a price that the shepherd pays; the journey to find the lost one is a difficult one. It is costly for the shepherd to put the lost one on his shoulders and bear it home. K. Bailey, in *Poet and Peasant*, wrote on this subject, "In this theme of the burden of restoration there are clear Christological implications which point in the direction of the passion. The shepherd must carry on his shoulders the burden of the lost sheep, a detail that is specifically mentioned."

What are those Christological implications? Simply this, to accomplish the restoration of the lost, the Good Shepherd, the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, came as man to suffer and die. He bore the burden of the lost on His shoulders as His arms were spread and bound to a wooden beam and nails were driven into His hands and feet. He hung, bleeding and dying, scourged, crowned with thorns, giving His life as a ransom for the lost. And of His last words before death He said, "It is done." It is accomplished. Or, as St. Paul put it, "[W]hile we were still sinners, Christ died for us...while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son." (Romans 5:8b, 10a) You were reconciled to God, restored to a right relationship with God.

No longer is the reconciled one, the restored one an enemy of God. And, "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." (2 Corinthians 5:17) The reconciled one has peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. (cf. Romans 5:1)

Can there be so much joy over the recovery of something so small and insignificant? Absolutely. Straight from the lips of God walking in the flesh you hear, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy

before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” God in His Son paid a price by bearing the full weight of sin and sins committed. So think of it this way: do you not rejoice when something you invested much time and money in is productive, when it does what it is supposed to do, works like it is supposed to, produces the desired effect. Likewise, there is much rejoicing before the angels of God over one sinner who repents and receives the benefits of the price the Son of God paid: reconciliation and restoration. The difference is that the joy is not because the repentant in repentance somehow becomes worthy of the price paid for his restoration, but in that he has been restored! There is much joy in heaven over one sinner who repents because he has been reconciled and restored.

So, go back to what Jesus said in Levi’s house. “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.” Jesus has come as the Good Shepherd to call sinners to repentance. He comes with all mercy and grace, comes to show you your sin and be your Savior, calling for repentance and giving forgiveness.

The joy in what He said in Levi’s house is that when He calls sinners to repent, He gives the words with which to repent. Those who are not in self-righteous doubt which denies the need for repentance and a Savior then speak those words. Words such are found in today’s Psalm:

Let my cry come before you, O LORD; give me understanding according to your word! Let my plea come before you; deliver me according to your word. My lips will pour forth praise, for you teach me your statutes. My tongue will sing of your word, for all your commandments are right. Let your hand be ready to help me, for I have chosen your precepts. I long for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight. Let my soul live and praise you, and let your rules help me. I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments. (Psalm 119:169-176)

Or in Psalm 51:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit. (Psalm 51:1-12)

Or in Psalm 86:

Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Preserve my life, for I am godly; save your servant, who trusts in you—you are my God. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all the day. Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you. Give ear, O LORD, to my prayer; listen to my plea for grace. In the day of my trouble I call upon you, for you answer me. (Psalm 86:1-7)

Or as simply as was spoken by the publican—that “*am-ha-arets*”—in the back of the temple, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” (Luke 18:13)

So, when one speaks those words in repentance, there is much joy in heaven, because there are more words for the repentant. Words not for him to speak, but for him to hear from his called and ordained servant of the word: "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." His sins are forgiven then and there as surely and certainly as they are in heaven, and there is much rejoicing in heaven, in the presence of the angels of God, over the forgiveness given this one.

And this rejoicing is not limited to those who call themselves Christians. Even scribes and Pharisees can repent and be absolved—even those who outright reject and deny the Savior, those who persecute Him. Case in point, one man named Saul, who was a Pharisee of highest order and training, who once wrote to a young pastor that which was read earlier and which you will again sing in a little while:

I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.

(1 Timothy 1:12-15)

Saul was converted on the road to Damascus and received forgiveness from God through His servant Ananias, and there was much joy in heaven and rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God. So it is for all who repent and receive the forgiveness of sins.

That joy is also present in the Church Militant. For here, you are gathered by the Spirit of God, where you by God-given repentance confess your sins and receive forgiveness. And you rejoice to hear those words with a joy that culminates as you laud and magnify God's glorious name with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven and take your place at the foretaste of the Feast of the Lamb which has no end. There most certainly is "joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." After all, the highest form of worship is to be in the presence of God to be given to.

So, you are invited. Come, the feast is ready; rejoice, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.