

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church  
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Trinity 3, 2013  
Luke 15:1-10<sup>i</sup>

### Part I

Our text tells us that people were flocking around Jesus. That's not something we are used to. People don't go around city streets, drawing a crowd. It's not what we know in life...or is it? Actually this same sort of thing does happen in a different forum. Today it happens on the internet. There people flock to internet sites.

For example, one site I like to visit is USA Today.com. It gives me a quick overview of basic news being reported. I choose a headline that interests me and then I read it. After having read the article, I like to see what people think of it. So I read below to see the readers' comments. Some hang on to the journalist's words. Others are critical.

That's what we see happening in our text. People were flocking around Jesus. They had come to hear what he had to say. Some hung onto his words, while others were critical.

### Part II

Those that hung on to Jesus' words were tax collectors and sinners. Taken together they were sinners whose sins were known *to the public*. Tax collectors were

known for overcharging, getting rich at the expense of the tax payer. Other public sinners had a bad reputation of loose morals; for being the neighborhood alcoholic, etc. These public sinners were generally shunned by the public; and, excluded from the community.

It's true. They ran after their sinful passions. They tried to satisfy a longing hankering to be filled. They sought pleasure for the moment. They looked for it in the bottle; in filthy riches; in fleeting pleasure. In the end, though, they were left lacking. Their life of sin did not bring lasting satisfaction. As a result, they had a sense of being lost. It was to these lost that Jesus came. He found them with gospel words; and they found themselves hanging on to his words.

Then there were others in the crowd, the Pharisees and scribes. *These* were the critics. They didn't like it that Jesus mingled with tax collectors and sinners. In fact, they were indignant. They thought that Jesus was wasting his time. In their minds, tax collectors and sinners were not worth the effort. They felt this way because they were *self-righteous*.

Since they were self-righteous, they hurled a slur at Jesus. "This man receives sinners and eats with them." What they meant to be a slur, though, was really a *compliment*. Jesus takes the opportunity to show how. He does by telling two parables.

### Part III

In the first parable one out of a hundred sheep gets lost. You can picture the sheep among a flock in a green pasture. He is nibbling and nibbling, moving from one tuft of grass to another. He doesn't pay attention to where he is at. Before he knows it, he is lost, separated from the flock. As he continues on his way, he stumbles into some brambles. Now he's really in a fix. The harder he tries to get out, the tighter the brambles hold.

In those brambles the sheep is easy prey for the lion on the prowl. When the lion spots him, he goes for the sheep. His sinewy body moves closer step by step. Step by step the muscles in his shoulders can be seen tightening. His mane makes him look even more fearsome. A deep throated roar paralyzes the sheep in fear. The sheep is dead in its tracks.

That's what happens to the sinner who strays from Jesus. A tempting tuft of sin leads to another and then to another. The more he gets the more he wants. He's happy; and that's what matters – even if it separates him from the church. He thinks he has found what satisfies. What he doesn't realize it that he lost in sin; caught in its brambles.

At some point, he feels a gnawing emptiness. Empty, he realizes is not in a good place. He might try this philosophy; that religious fad to fill that void. Though he tries, he doesn't know. He can't find his way out. He only gets himself stuck deeper in brambles of sin. He is

good and lost, unable to free himself. Caught, he is prey to the devil.

In the second parable, one out of ten coins gets lost. You can picture that coin as part of a necklace. The necklace breaks and one of the coins rolls onto the floor. A typical floor among Jesus' audience was made of basalt stone. The stones were dark and had cracks between them.

Not only that, their homes were quite small, the size of a one car garage. Small windows were mounted high on the wall about head level. It made for dimly lit homes. In such a dimly lit home the coin rolls onto the floor. Lost in the dark; in a crack in the floor; the coin can't find its way back to the owner. It is absurd to think it can. It can't because it has no life in it.

That's how the lost sinner is by nature. There is nothing the sinner can do to get back to God. It is as impossible as a coin finding its way back to its owner. That is, the sinner is dead in sin. Dead in sin means that there is no life in the sinner. Like a lifeless coin, falling into a dark crack, the sinner is hopelessly lost in the darkness of sin.

It is why we are taught in the catechism to say, "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him."<sup>ii</sup> That is, the sinner can't roll out of the dark crack of sin. He can't find its way into the light. It is just not possible. Not at all!

## Part IV

So...what was Jesus driving at with these two parables? He was working on the self-righteous sinner. What the self-righteous sinner *does not realize* is that he is the lost coin; that he is the lost sheep. He is just as lost; lost in sinful pride; caught in its thorny brambles; fallen in the crack of self-righteousness. His false pride keeps him from finding his way back to God.

This self-righteous pride is the *religion of the human heart*. It is the basis of all false religion. It is the basis all false confidence. About it someone said, "In the *greatest* peril are works-righteous people who trust their own piety.<sup>iii</sup>" While they think they have what it takes, they are blind to the fact that they are lost; just as lost; and that is what puts the self-righteous in such peril.

The thing is, there is this self-righteous Pharisee in all of us. Who of us, for example, hasn't felt that a lost sinner is not worth the effort; that the lost sinner doesn't matter? Who of us hasn't thought, "They got themselves into their own fix. Let them get them selves out. Let them find their way back to God," as if we had been able to do that. We couldn't. Or, who of us hasn't reacted to big public sinners, "He made his choice. Let him go to the devil. He gets what he deserves," as if we don't. We do.

That self-righteous Pharisee in us puts us in peril of the brambles of hell; of being snatched by the devil's

powerful jaws; falling into the crack of eternal darkness; lost forever.

## Part V

The only way out of being lost, then, is to be found. That's what Jesus does. He searches for the lost sinner; for the public sinner; for the self-righteous sinner. In his search he will let nothing get in his way.

He is like the shepherd in the parable of the Lost Sheep. Each sheep matters in the shepherd's sight - even a lost sheep. For the shepherd, then, there is no trail that is too dangerous; no valley that is too steep; no bramble thicket that is too prickly.

Nothing can stop him from searching. Not even dangerous predators can hinder him. The lost sheep is in danger. Finding that lost sheep is a matter of utmost importance *lest* his life be lost. So, the shepherd puts his life on the line for the lost sheep.

That's what Jesus did. Jesus came to seek lost sinners of every stripe. Like a faithful shepherd, he walked the trail to the cross. On the way he carried his own cross. He ran through the thicket of brambles, letting himself be rent by the thorns. They placed a crown of thorns on his head. He went into the dark valley of death. He fell into death's jaws. He did, carrying the sins of lost sinners. Then, he broke free. He rose from the dead and crushed the devil's jaws.

...And all this for what? To pull *you* out of the devil's jaws. He did it for you because you *matter* to him. Your soul was of utmost importance *lest* your life be lost. He put it all on the line for you.

Not only that, but Jesus is also like the woman who searched for the lost coin. Those coins were like her bank account. Each one was worth a day's wage. Ten of them equaled half a month's wage. She had been entrusted with a relatively large sum of money for a modest family. The families in Jesus' audience lived day to day.

It's no wonder, then, that she lights a lamp in that dark home; she sweeps every corner; she peers into every crack. The coin is worth the effort. She searches until she finds the coin.

It all goes to say that each soul is precious in Jesus sight. Each soul is because he put the price of his blood on it. It's why we were also taught to say in the catechism, "Jesus Christ has redeemed me not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood.<sup>iv</sup>" ...and Jesus' blood has no limits to its worth. It doesn't because it is God's blood.

You can't put a price on that. Since you can't, you were *never* a waste to find. Not at all! Jesus searched for and found you, because you are *precious* in his sight.

## Part VI

So Jesus seeks and finds. He *found* you on the cross where he *saved* you. He *finds* you by means of his word,

where he *gives you* your salvation. It is the word that was first given to you by your family and friends. In that word, Jesus continues to find you; continues to gather you, the lost, in his hand like a found coin; to take you up in his arms, like a found sheep.

That is the *same word* he gives you, the found, to give to lost family and friends. He gives it to you to keep them in your prayers; to put in a well placed word here and there; to read and pray together in your homes. You may not see the results in this lifetime, but you may be surprised in heaven. No lost sheep is a waste of time. Every lost sheep is worth the effort. After all, Jesus considered you worth the effort, hopelessly lost as you were.

...And when Jesus finds, there is joy. There is “Joy over one sinner who repents.” The joy is for the sake of the found. Had they not been found, they would have remained lost. So, we rejoice with Jesus because other lost sinners are found *even as* he found you and me. Found, he will gather us safely into his heaven one day. Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> Citations of the text (NKJV) will not be cited in the sermon

<sup>ii</sup> Luther’s Small Catechism, The Third Article

<sup>iii</sup> Johann Gerhard, *Postilla*, Vol.2, translated by Dr. O. Marc Tangner, Repristination Press, Malone, Texas, 2007, p. 40

<sup>iv</sup> Luther’s Small Catechism, The Second Article