

14th Sunday after Pentecost
September 14, 2025
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church

Luke 15:1-10 (EHV)

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³He told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that was lost until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls together his friends and his neighbors, telling them, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!’ ⁷I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.

⁸“Or what woman who has ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, would not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹And when she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found the lost coin.’ ¹⁰In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

There have been attempts throughout history to make a better society. People have rightly noticed that the problem in society is people. Not people like me, of course. People different from me are the problem. If we could just gather up the right people into a community, things would be great. Monks gathered in monasteries to escape the temptations of the world and serve God in peace. Nuns gathered in abbeys for similar reasons. Communes formed in various places with the intention of sharing everything and living in peace with everyone. All such attempts fail in one way or another because there are still people in the community, and every person brings their sinful nature into that community.

We can think of the Pharisees as one of these purity groups in history. They separated themselves from the impure, unclean sinners of society by their strict obedience to the law of God. Of course, with all such groups in history, they added their own rules to God’s law. Pharisees were preparing themselves for heaven. They worked hard to keep every commandment in every way so that God would rejoice over them. They were the people with whom God was pleased. They were the right people to make up a godly society on earth. Certainly, if Jesus was a prophet of the Lord, he would want to be with the Pharisees.

But Jesus made it very clear with his teaching that he did not agree with the Pharisees. He made it very clear with his actions that he wanted to be around a different group, a group considered to be sinners by the Pharisees. The reason these others were considered to be sinners is that they were sinners. They did not keep all the laws of God. They were not as outwardly good and upright as the Pharisees. Jesus’ association with such sinners really bothered the Pharisees.

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Do you ever find yourself complaining that our little gathering of people at Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church is not what you think it should be? We need more children...as long as they aren’t noisy. We want more members...as long as they are mature Lutherans already. We want more young people...as long as they don’t upset the way we do things with new ideas. We want lots more members like us so that everything will go well. If we ever think that this congregation would be perfect if only the others in the congregation were more like me – pray like me, teach like me, give like me, sing like me, volunteer like me, lead like me, think like me – then Jesus has a humbling message for us today. Jesus welcomes sinner and eats with them. Jesus came to find the lost sheep and the lost coin. Jesus rejoices over repentance and not self-righteousness. Listen to the parables again.

Which one of you, if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that was lost until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls together his friends and his neighbors, telling them, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!' ⁷I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.

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How foolish of the shepherd to leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness. A lion or wolf or bear could attack. He could lose many of his sheep while looking for the one who wandered off. Why risk the ninety-nine to save the one? And how much effort would you put into looking for a coin you dropped? I've still got 90% of what I started with. I can get another coin if I don't find it in a short time of looking. That is the practical way of looking at our possessions that can sometimes be applied by us to people. We've got a good group of people in our congregation. Why look for someone who is clearly lost to add to the group? We've got to keep our group pure. We can't let someone who wandered away from faith into all kinds of immorality ruin the purity of our little group. We can't take the time and energy and money away from the pure group to seek the lost. That is the way the Pharisees were thinking.

If we begin to think like a Pharisee, it is good to remember that we were all completely lost at one time. We were all on the path of unrighteousness, all under the control of sin, all enemies of God. We were all lost and condemned creatures and Jesus found us. He is the Good Shepherd who searched and searched until he found us. He lifted us up on his shoulders and carried us back to his flock. He brought us to repentance and faith. He forgave all our sins. He rescued us and saved us eternally. Jesus considered you to be worth it to search for and rescue. He gave his very life to forgive our sins.

Jesus only came to seek and to save sinners. The Pharisees did not think they were lost. They did not think they were sinners. They are the ninety-nine who do not think they need to repent. While Jesus came to save all and died for all and paid for the sins of the whole world, those who will not repent are telling Jesus to keep his gift of forgiveness for someone who really needs it. They forfeit the forgiveness Christ freely offers. There is no rejoicing in heaven over a lost sinner who refuses to believe that they are a lost sinner.

But there is great rejoicing when one lost sinner repents. Think about that. Jesus did everything to save me. He lived perfectly. He resisted every temptation. He suffered and died in my place. He brought the Word to me. He brought me to faith in baptism. He changed my heart. And God rejoices when I repent which is nothing more than admitting that I am a lost sinner in need of rescue.

When we think of ways to thank God and do what is pleasing to him, we may think of good works. We show Jesus our thanks for all he has done by keeping God's commands. We sing praises to him in hymns. We pray prayers of thanks and adoration. We proclaim the wonders God has done so that others may know the grace and mercy of Christ. These are all good and right ways to thank the Lord and do what is pleasing to him. Repentance might be the best. Jesus tells us at the end of the parable of the lost sheep and lost coin that the repentance of one sinner brings joy to heaven.

Some Christians have the idea that if you sing with enough enthusiasm and volume, if you pray long enough and passionately enough and have enough people praying at the same time, if you have the right music and the right rituals in worship, God will be present with those believers at that place in their worship. If you do the right things loudly enough God will be pleased. But Jesus tells us something different today. Humble yourself before the Lord in repentance and there is rejoicing in heaven. Beg for his forgiveness and the songs of the angels will fill heaven with joy. For the Lord Jesus loves to forgive sins. He loves to find the lost. He loves to rescue sinners. Repent and turn to Jesus for

him to do what he came to do, forgive sinners.

The Pharisees made the other Jews feel bad about not being as righteous as them, as pure as them. You can imagine that many people didn't want to be around the Pharisees. Maybe some of them would stop going to synagogue because that is where the Pharisees went and all they were going to here was how you should be more like the Pharisees. People might stay away from Christian churches for a similar reason today. They have the idea, sometimes because it is true, that church is a place for good people. Church is a place where people who don't have problems go. If I go to church, I'll just be made to feel less than and where they will heap up the guilt on me. I'll pass.

Perhaps you are the person who shows them what Jesus wants the church to be. You show them by your humble repentance. You show them when your conversations are not all about how bad people are in society but more about how good Jesus has been to you. I know a pastor who would often wear a shirt that simply said, "I like church." Whether you order a t-shirt or not, we can let it be known that we like church. There are many lost sheep still waiting to be found. Maybe Jesus is using you to find them and let them know the joy of gathering with other believers in church.

We get to come here and not be judged by the people sitting beside us for what we have or haven't done. For we come to this place not to show how good we are to God, but to beg for his forgiveness which he freely gives in Christ. We come to this place not to solve all of the world's problems (of which the headlines remind us are numerous and terrible), but to lay down our anxiety and worries before our Savior who cares for us like a shepherd looking for one lost sheep or a woman sweeping the whole house just to find one lost coin. We come here to lay every burden down before Christ so that he can lift us up, carry us on his strong shoulders, and bring us at last to our heavenly home where there will be loud rejoicing by the whole flock forever.

Amen.