



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 14, 2025
EXODUS 32:7-14; PSALM 51:1-11; 1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17; LUKE 15:1-10

FINDERS KEEPERS

Luke 15:1-10 *[All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and 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. "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, 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 in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."]*

What do we do with a God who won't give up on the lost? Before we judge the Pharisees and scribes in today's Gospel too harshly for their criticism of Jesus ("This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them"), we can admit that their struggle is sometimes our own. We too don't know what to do with a God who is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. The names on our personal "lost cause" list may differ; the fact that many of us have such a

list – fueled by the bigotry and bitterness and violence that swirl around us these days - remains the same. So, to all of us who still find ourselves wanting justice for them (but mercy for ourselves), Jesus offers the following parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one who is lost until he finds it?"

Funny – he never says how the sheep got lost. To be fair, the shepherd's voice can be hard to hear sometimes, especially when every other voice is louder. Maybe the sheep once followed another shepherd who wasn't so trustworthy. It happens. So, when the Good Shepherd came, the sheep had stopped listening to shepherds altogether. Why don't we hear more about how the sheep got lost? Because blame is not the point of this story. When we're really lost, what matters most is someone who notices we're missing and who won't stop until we're found.

In contrast to some popular images of God as Divine Scorekeeper or Blind Watchmaker, God here is typically seen as the Good Shepherd who seeks us out, who goes anywhere to find us no matter how long it takes, who then carries us on his shoulders and brings us home. By that logic, in the next parable, God is the woman who scours every inch of her home to find her lost coin, not caring how much she already has because, in her eyes, each coin is infinitely valuable.

(As an aside, it's interesting – we have all kinds of pictures of God as the Good Shepherd – but I have yet to see an icon or a stained-glass window of God as the Careful Homemaker. I wonder if the image of God inside us would be any easier to see if not just tending sheep but tending homes and children and families were seen as equal windows to the Holy. Just a thought.)

I also wonder sometimes where our less healthy images of God come from. After all, the center of our worship space is not a scoreboard; it's an open table. Some say our more fearful images come from the Old Testament. That view oversimplifies things. After all, these are the only Scriptures that Jesus knew. But our reading from Exodus today doesn't help much in redeeming our view – at least at first. Say what you will about this portrayal of an angry Almighty; at least God isn't absent or indifferent or blind or any of our usual complaints. This God is passionately engaged in the lives of the people, a little too passionate for most of us. With the vehemence of a betrayed

spouse, the hurt of a father whose child reaches first for someone else, the pain of a mother whose children won't speak to her anymore, God vents to Moses.

What interests me in this admittedly problematic passage is how Moses intercedes for the people. Not once does he argue for their salvation based on their track record, that they somehow deserve a second chance, that they can turn it around on their own and do better next time. No, what matters here is who God is. Even if the people have forgotten, Moses hasn't – and he trusts that God hasn't truly forgotten either. The scene ends with God relenting – not because of the people's convincing repentance or remorse, but by the sheer mercy and grace of God.

For some of us, this is the most incredulous part of the story. Given all that we've witnessed this week, since when does mercy win in this life? Well, consider who we're dealing with. If the choice today is between the power of God to be generous and our power to resist, the power of God to find us and our

power to stay lost, the power of God to open doors and our power to close them, I'll go with God every time. Praise God - we are not on equal footing with the Almighty.

This isn't to say we're in no need of repentance or changing direction. Of course, we are.

We don't need to come to church to hear that. Just watch the news. What we need to hear most is not how right or wrong we are, but whose we are – and how infinitely valuable we all are in God's eyes, no matter how lost or forgotten we feel. So, today, instead of calling you merely to repent, I'll follow Jesus' lead and invite you to rejoice. Rejoice as though what will happen already has. God's silence is not God's absence. Those who are lost to us are not lost to God. Even we can't stand in our own way forever. My best advice: Try staying still for once. Let yourself be found. After all, there's no scoreboard here, just an open table and a relentless host. "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Thanks be to God. Amen.



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