

September 15, 2019
New Song Episcopal Church
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(All lectionary passages are included below the sermon text.)

Lost

When I grew up we sang a hymn. The melody is beautiful. The hymn contains a line that always left me unsettled. See if you can figure out which one.

Alas and did my Savior bleed?

And did my Sovereign die?

Would he devote that sacred head

For such a worm as I?¹

A friend of mine once said, “Christians don’t tell lies, we sing them.” That alone is a sermon in itself. I have to say that hasn’t been the case here at New Song, but there is a lot more caution and intent in song selection song. We would never call anyone here a worm, including ourselves.

Today’s Gospel reading begins with scribes and Pharisees grumbling against Jesus and criticizing that “he welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Jesus responded with parables, but his meaning is clear.

In the first parable, someone has a hundred sheep and one is lost. They go out, leaving the 99 to seek out the lost sheep. When the sheep is found, friends and neighbors are called in to celebrate.

¹ Alas and My Savior Bleed by Isaac Watts (lyrics) and Ralph Erskine Hudson (lyrics and music)

What does it mean that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”? I have an idea. Hang on, I’ll get there.

Jesus second parable is about a woman who had 10 silver coins and lost one. She searched the house, carefully sweeping and cleaning, until the coin was found. And again, a party happens.

The parable ends with “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents”.

The Apostle Paul, writing to Timothy, seems to agree with my maligned hymn writer when he calls himself the foremost of sinners. It’s possible, but I think he was trying to do something else.

It is so common to believe things like “I’m not good enough” or even “I’m a worm.” (That word choice still makes me laugh, while breaking my heart for anyone who believes it.)

The thing is, that is not how God sees you. Here’s how I know.

Jesus didn’t stop with two parables in response to the grumbling scribes and Pharisees. He actually told three. Now, I looked ahead at upcoming readings and made sure I’m not stealing someone else’s future sermon text, so I’m going to cover that third parable as well. It is one we all think we know, one that is commonly called “The

Prodigal Son”.

I think it should be named “The Lost Son” because it follows directly on the heels of “The Lost Sheep” and “The Lost Coin”.

In this parable of the lost son, we see a father ridiculed and scorned by his younger son, to the point of the son saying culturally, “I wish you were already dead, give me my inheritance now and I’m getting out of here”. In fact, he did say all of that, except the first line.

Listeners to these three parables were likely following along easily when talking about the sheep and the coin, but this was shocking. They had to be aghast that any son would be permitted to speak to a father this way. They were certainly shocked that the father granted the request.

Then, our radical friend, Jesus, shocks them further. The son comes back. The father has been looking, watching for him all this time. He sees his son while still far off, gathers up his robes, and runs out to meet him in the road.

The crowd must be perplexed. Confused. Wait? He didn’t run out to beat the son and chase him away for his ghastly behavior?

What?! He put a ring and a robe on the son and called a party??

The scribes and the Pharisees were the older son in that third parable, the son who always did what he was supposed to do and who looked with disdain on his brother

and on his father for welcoming his brother. God is always the seeker of that which was lost.

Sometimes, we are lost, perhaps so far lost that we wake up sitting in a pig pen realizing that the pigs eat better than we do and it's all our own fault. God is still watching, waiting with love, hoping to find you walking home. Home, where you belong, where you are accepted because you are loved, where you don't have to do anything special to belong and merit a ring and a robe and a celebration.

You are not a worm. You are beloved. So is every other person sitting here. So is every person you meet out there.

May we all live lives so full of this love, so changed by receiving it, that it spills out onto everyone we meet.

Amen.

The Old Testament: Exodus 32:7-14

The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation."

But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, 'I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall

inherit it forever." And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.

The Psalm: Psalm 51:1-11

Miserere mei, Deus

1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; *
in your great compassion blot out my offenses.

2 Wash me through and through from my wickedness *
and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I know my transgressions, *
and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against you only have I sinned *
and done what is evil in your sight.

5 And so you are justified when you speak *
and upright in your judgment.

6 Indeed, I have been wicked from my birth, *
a sinner from my mother's womb.

7 For behold, you look for truth deep within me, *
and will make me understand wisdom secretly.

8 Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; *
wash me, and I shall be clean indeed.

9 Make me hear of joy and gladness, *
that the body you have broken may rejoice.

10 Hide your face from my sins *
and blot out all my iniquities.

11 Create in me a clean heart, O God, *
and renew a right spirit within me.

The Epistle: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. 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 sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

The Gospel: 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."