

Luke 15:1-7

There is a prayer in our hymnal asking God to have mercy on those who have wandered from the faith. And also a prayer for those outside the church, asking God to gather them into His church. We typically refer to such people as those who are lost. Yet we use this word in a compassionate manner. We pray for the lost, desiring that God seeks them and finds them, turning them by way of repentance to their Savior, Jesus Christ.

It is only natural for us to conclude that such people are the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son in Luke 15. But we should never pull any Scripture out of context and place it by itself. The context for these parables of Jesus is the narrative just prior where the Pharisees and scribes grumble at Him. They are offended at Jesus for welcoming sinners and eating with them. I'm going to read these few verses again, but include the context of the last verse in Luke 14, the verse just before our text where Jesus says: "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear...Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This fella receives sinners and even eats with them.'*"

Jesus' parables in Luke 15 are a response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and scribes. And it is clear that the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son are those sinners who are despised by the Pharisees and scribes, but who are the very ones drawing near to Jesus to hear Him. And this should cause us to re-think how we use the word *lost*.

We think we know who is in and who is out, who is lost and who is found. We label people, placing them into such categories. And we also do this to ourselves. We may not look down upon those we label as lost, as the Pharisees and scribes did, but like these same Pharisees and scribes, we would never put ourselves into that category of being lost. "I once was lost," we sing, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." I know others who are still lost, and I pray for them. But that's not me.

But if you and I are not the lost sheep in Jesus' parable, then who are we? There are only two options. The one sheep who is lost, and the ninety-nine sheep out in the open country. But these ninety-nine, says Jesus, have no need for repentance.

The only sheep who have no need to repent are sheep who are dead and are already in heaven, or sheep such as the Pharisees and scribes who think they have no need to repent because they're good enough just the way they are. And since no one here is dead and in heaven, and hopefully no one here is like the Pharisees and scribes, this rules out the possibility that we are the ninety-nine.

Sheep are never static, but are always moving. Sheep never stay where they are...spiritually that is. Jesus' sheep are either growing, and maturing, and following Him, or wandering off and getting lost. And as with sheep, so with Jesus. He is never static, but always moving. He moves in mercy toward His sheep. His parable is not an isolated incident. Jesus is always seeking His lost sheep, finding them, and drawing them back to Himself in love. In heaven He'll stay put. But here and now He is always on the move because we sheep are always on the move.

We're not "little angels." You and I are not the perfect sheep we pretend to be. And here's the thing...if we are unwilling to admit this, we are no different from the Pharisees and scribes. But if we are willing to confess this, by the grace of God, then we will admit that we are, day after day, that lost sheep in the parable. But this is a good thing, because Jesus leaves the ninety-nine and goes after His sheep who are always getting lost.

The first of Luther's ninety-five theses points out that repentance is not a "once-in-a-lifetime thing." But that the entire life of a Christian is one of repentance. And since repentance is the work of God in sinners, we can see why the sinners in our text are all drawing near to hear Jesus, for this also is God's gracious work. Let me simply spell out what this means... the lost sheep in the parable are not those out there, but those in here. It's you, who by God's gracious work are drawing near to hear Jesus. And He is welcoming you and eating with you.

Those out there in the open country are the ninety-nine, for they think they have no need to repent, and thus no need to have Jesus seek them and find them and bring them here. This is why we pray for them, that God in mercy turns them; that they recognize their need to be here with you as that lost sheep, drawing near to hear Jesus, whose entire life is one of repentance.

You can be too good for Jesus, but never too bad. Some years ago I had a conversation with a man who said he was too much of a lost sinner for Jesus to help him. I did not tell him this, but there is no worse sin than the one he was committing. He was point blank saying that what Jesus did on the cross was not good enough to save him. Rather, I tried to douse his unbelief with the water of his baptism. I gave him the Gospel. But he walked away and wanted no part of it.

You can never be too lost for Jesus to find you. You can never be too sinful for Jesus to forgive you. The sinners in our text were the worst of the worst. Others despised them, and for good reason. But they were not too sinful for Jesus. He welcomed them. He ate with them...a very intimate thing to do. He forgave them, and friend, He forgives you too. And He told them, and us, to go and sin no more.

But sinners sin. Hey, it's what we do. But not because we want to. But when sinners sin and get lost in their sins, they always have...you always have...a place with Jesus. Remember always that your baptism into Christ never leaves you. Even when you get lost in your sins, you remain Jesus' precious sheep.

And so you can always bring your sins here to Him. He never frowns upon you. He never despises you. He was despised for you. He became sin on the cross for you. You can be too good to be here, but never too bad. Jesus never pushes you away because you are too awful to be here with Him. He always welcomes you with hands outstretched; hands pierced with nails for you.

So when we pray for those out there, it's kind of ironic isn't it?- the lost sheep praying for the ninety-nine. Yet no one is truly lost who is drawn to Jesus to hear Him. Amen.