

Luke 15:1-10

The hymn we just sang is based, not upon the words of Jesus, but upon the words of the Scribes and Pharisees: “This man,” they muttered, “receives sinners and eats with them.” Now I doubt very much that they would have been pleased had they known that a hymn would be written from their words of grumbling, and that Christians around the world would sing that hymn with joy. They would want to inquire of us, “How can you be happy to know that Jesus welcomes and eats with sinners?” To them it was beneath a righteous man to associate with the immoral filth of society. But to us it is our faith and our reason for living; for if Jesus did not receive sinners, then He would not receive us.

At the same time, I have to wonder if we really and truly believe these words. What would happen, for example, if we switched the word “sinner” for the different categories of sinners? Instead of singing “Jesus Sinners Doth Receive,” what if we sang “Jesus Rapists Doth Receive,” or “Jesus Terrorists Doth Receive,” or “Jesus Child-Slayers Doth Receive?” If we were to keep going, sooner or later we would find ourselves, like the Pharisees, muttering: “This man receives sinners!” And we, like them, would not be too pleased; for there are people...”sinners” if you will, that we look down upon. Like the Pharisees, we do not place ourselves along with all categories of sinners out there. We think we are more righteous than some.

It is good, therefore, that we are gathered here today in God’s House, for He would lead us away from our Pharisaical way of thinking to His Word of Truth. The words He speaks to the Pharisees then, and to us today, are the words of the parable we know as the Lost Sheep. A man has one hundred sheep. He loses one of them. Not three, not ten, not twenty...he loses one. And yet he goes out to search for that one lost sheep.

Whether you think much of yourself, or not, consider what this means for you. Each one of you is precious to Jesus. Whether you’re nine or ninety-nine, wealthy or dirt-poor; whether you have served the Lord all your life or done nothing for Him, each one of you is precious to Him. One sheep becomes lost and the man goes out to find it.

And who knows why that sheep became lost? Maybe it hurt its foot and could not keep up with the others. Maybe it fell off a cliff. Maybe it wandered off on purpose. The man did not care why it was lost; he only cared about the fact that it was lost. Sometimes we do stupid things which cause us to lose our way. We stop reading our Bible for a time. We neglect to come to God’s House and to His Supper. We head right into temptation and become entangled by our sins. Jesus never says, “Well, that’s your own dumb fault! Too bad for you.” No! He doesn’t care why we become lost; He only cares about the fact that we are lost. He doesn’t put less effort into His search if we became lost due to our own disobedience. He searches for His lost sheep, not because of what the sheep did or didn’t do, but because of the fact that it is His sheep that is lost.

And you are His sheep. In your baptism He claimed you. You became His. This was not our doing; it was God who chose you to be His sheep. He didn’t check you first for imperfections and blemishes. He doesn’t call the righteous, but sinners. We were nothing to look at; not one good thing to our credit; a sheep that every other shepherd would have rejected. But Jesus wanted you—not because of what you would do for Him, but because of what He would do for you. He would live a perfect, holy life for you, and that life is

now yours in your baptism. He would suffer and die for you so that you would be His dear forgiven sheep. And He would rise from the dead for you so that He now gives you His risen life through the feeding of His Word and Sacrament. And because you are His sheep, He searches for you when you become lost.

We need to ask ourselves a very important question: “Which one of those one hundred sheep am I? Am I one of the ninety-nine, or am I the one that is lost?” I think we’re pretty quick to pick out the lost sheep among us. We notice church members who are straying. We hear about those who fall away. We have those lost sheep within our own families. And because we so clearly see those who are lost, we tend to include ourselves among the ninety-nine. But it’s nice, we think, that Jesus searches for His lost ones. It’s also nice and good to be a part of the group of ninety-nine.

Friend, there is something we need to know. The ninety-nine are not the ones in here, but the ones out there. We are the one who is lost. The ninety-nine, says Jesus, do not need to repent. We do, and that is why we come here week after week, to confess our sins along with other sheep who are lost. What! Do we say, “I’m not the chief of sinners, Lord?” No! We confess that we are poor, lost sinners; sheep who daily wander away from the Lord; and it’s our own fault, our own sinful fault! The ninety-nine have no need for such repentance because, for some reason, they have fooled themselves into believing that they are not lost sheep; that they don’t need their Shepherd to find them, because they’re doing just fine on their own.

The ninety-nine are out there; the one that is lost is in here. Notice, where in the parable does the man spend his time? With the ninety-nine, or searching and finding the one lost sheep? He leaves the ninety-nine and goes to seek and save the lost sheep—and that’s exactly where Jesus is today. He is found here in the preaching of His Word and in the bread and wine of His Holy Supper, because in and through His Word and Sacraments Jesus is calling His lost sheep back to Himself.

Does Jesus love the ninety-nine? Of course, but His is not with the ninety-nine. He leaves them out there to be with you in here. Look where He spent His time in our text. He hung out with the “sinners.” He didn’t hang out with the ninety-nine. He ate and drank with those who were lost because they were the sinners who were repenting. The Pharisees had no use for Jesus, and so He left them alone to go and teach the tax collectors and “sinners.”

You are the ones the angels in heaven rejoice over, not because of how you live and act, but because you are in here repenting of your sins; because you are lost and this you confess; and because Jesus comes, not to sheep who think they have no need to be found, but to you—to sheep who, day after day, need Jesus to come and find them. Because you and I keep wandering away from Him—sometimes on purpose; sometimes because we’re just so busy. He doesn’t ask why. He is not here to punish you. He is here to forgive you. And He does. No matter how lost you think you are, Jesus is here for you. He sees you in your lost condition and He calls out to you: I forgive you all your sins; I forgive you for wandering away from Me; I forgive you for neglecting My Word and Sacrament; I forgive you because I died for you.

Each one of you lost sheep is, right here and now, one of Jesus’ forgiven sheep. And no matter how far you run away from Him tomorrow and through the week, He will always be

here to find you and forgive you in His Word and Sacraments. Let's not wander away. Let's stay always with the Lord Jesus. Let's admit that without Him, we are lost; that we need Him daily; we need His living Word; we need His flesh and blood for us. But remember that you are Jesus' precious sheep, not because you stay with Him so well, but because He stays with you; He continues to search for you, and find you, and forgive you. Amen.