

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 15:1-10

The Lost Chapter

In the ninth chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus called the Evangelist, then a tax collector, to be an apostle. The Pharisees, like most Lion's fan, didn't like the draft pick. But Matthew proved Jesus' choice correct, because he did what the Pharisees refused to do: he got up and followed Jesus. And with this prized sinner of His in tow, the Good Shepherd looked at those blind shepherds, who wouldn't have known repentance if it kicked them in the pants, poked them in the eye, and sank their heart into their stomach, and said, *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."*

In my home parish, there was a very faithful man who happened to work for the IRS. He'd smile good-naturedly when one of the lessons mentioned tax collectors. Sometimes, as a joke, we'd assure him he could still be saved. But the problem with tax collectors at Jesus' time wasn't tax collecting. It was thievery and treason.

When the Romans conquered a region, they chose a local to collect taxes. Men would promise to nickel and dime exorbitant amounts of money out of their neighbors, intending, of course, to collect more than they promised Rome, and more than was owed, in order to line their pockets. Not only were these men collecting funds for the army that oppressed the Jewish people, but they robbing their own neighbors.

So why would Jesus want anything to do with such men? Why would He call one to be an apostle? We know it wasn't to raise funds, because Judas was in charge of the purse. So why? *"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."*

Jesus came for the lost. Jesus came for the sinner. And until a person realizes he's lost, until a person realizes she's a sinner, that person will have plenty of advice but little use for Jesus. But God didn't come to find out what we think. He can read our minds just fine, scary as that is. They're not exactly Shakespeare, after all. They're more soap opera than sacred text. Jesus didn't have to become man to get into our heads. No, God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason, and He shoves the Sacrament in our mouths for a reason: He wants us to listen.

The sinners and the tax collectors were already closer to the kingdom of God than the Pharisees and teachers of the law. It isn't because they were better people. No, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were better people. It was because they were *"gathering around Jesus to hear him."* If you want to look better in the eyes of the world, let the Mormons in next time they knock. If you want to look better in the eyes of God, wear your sins like a necktie, albeit an ugly one, and not like underwear. Hang them out there, even if it doesn't match what you want others to see. Sure, you're not going to look good. But Jesus came for the sick, and everyone in the hospital has to wear those embarrassing gowns that leave less to the imagination than we'd like if they want to be healed. To put it simply: If you have no sin, you have no Savior; if you have a Savior, you have no sin.

Jesus tells two parables here. First, He tells the story from our perspective. You've all been lost at one time another, whether as a child in a store or an adult on a road. You know

what it feels like to be lost, and you also know that you've got zero chance getting unlost until you admit you don't know where you are or how to get where you're going. Frantically running this way or that only makes matters worse, making you more lost or taking you further away from help. You're lost. So the best thing to do is stop, admit we're lost, admit we don't know how to get where we're going, and wait for help.

The Pharisees weren't lost, or at least they didn't think they were. The Pharisees didn't have anything to repent of, or at least they didn't think they did. And so Jesus pokes fun at their hypocrisy. They, together with all the self-righteous who trust their works instead of God's, are the ninety-nine in open country. They don't see their need or have much use for the Shepherd, and so He leaves them in open country, easy prey for wolves and thieves, where they are foolishly convinced they can fend for themselves. and He heads off for the one who does want and need His help. He desperately seeks that black sheep of the flock, the one the others look down upon, the one who makes the rest of the flock feel better about themselves, and joyfully sets it upon His shoulders when He finds it. That sheep is you. He placed you on His shoulders as He hung on your cross and died your death to forgive your sins and bring you back to the Father's fold.

The second parable is told from God's perspective. We see ourselves through God's eyes. Just as you've all been lost before, you've all lost something as well, whether your keys or wallet or anything else. And what do you do when you lose something? You do what you do when you are lost. You panic. And then you tear the house apart. All you can think about is what you've lost. You don't care that you still have many other things. You want what is missing. And that is how God feels about us. He places us behind His frantic eyes in this parable as we see just how anxious He is to find us. It is all He can think about, and He and His message tore this world apart to get the job done.

Nothing is more irritating to the little Pharisee in each of us than the gospel. It's unfair. You try hard to live according to God's laws and then this Jesus comes and says God's kind of people are precisely the kind of people you're trying so hard not to be. You work your best to avoid sin and then Jesus says He came to find the sinners. God finally came to earth, the Pharisees who had labored so long to lead impressive outward lives stuck out their chests to receive their medals, and Jesus walks on by and calls tax collectors and sinners to follow Him.

So what do we do? Now, you're not going to hear this from your pastor everyday, but today I am going to go ahead and say it. Be all-out sinners. No, I am not giving you a license to sin. Rather, I am telling you to be honest about it. The difference between those criticizing Jesus and those listening to Jesus wasn't that they were sinners; the difference was that those listening were willing to admit what they were, and even to let others call them what they were. And that was step one. Step two was hearing Jesus disagree and call them what they were in Him, the Good Shepherd: found and forgiven. Hiding sins doesn't get rid of them any better than tossing the clutter in the closet gets rid of the mess. It just moves the yucky things around on the plate, like a little boy who doesn't want to eat his mashed potatoes. Only forgiveness can take sins away.

We may be a barnful of scraggly sheep. The prettier ones may be out there in the open country where Mama Wolf is planning on serving lamb chops for dinner. But scraggly is all

right with me, because scraggly sheep are the Shepherd's kind of sheep, are Jesus' kind of people. Why not give the angels something to sing about and give Jesus our sins? Why not put a smile on the Savior's face and take our place on His shoulders? Trust me, the view is better from up there.

This may be the lost chapter of St. Luke's gospel, not that we didn't know where it was before—it's always been after chapter 14, but in that Jesus deals with the lost, but I'm sure glad we've found it, because it tells us we're what we'd never have guessed we'd be. We are the one. You're not just a number to Jesus. You are the one. Who cares what the world thinks about Jesus' draft pick? He's never been wrong before. Amen.