

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Luke 15:1-10

The Shepherd's Shoulders

Tom had suffered a major heart attack. The paramedics rushed to his house. They loaded him on the ambulance and sped to the hospital. When they arrived, the doors of the ambulance swung open. Out came Tom, wheeled frantically by the concerned medics. "We've got a heart attack over here that needs immediate treatment." The nurses and doctors from the hospital ran over, looked at Tom, grimaced, and said, "Take him to St. Mary's, he won't look very good in our emergency room. He is too sickly."

Jane had lost her keys. She was late for work and knew there would be consequences if she missed her deadline. She frantically tore every part of the house apart. Couch cushions were strewn throughout the living room. Clothes hung on the lamps and the dressers. Drawers were laying on the floor with their contents heaped in disorder. "I've gotta find those keys," she kept yelling. The task consumed her. Finally she found them. On her way to work, she sped by the house of her unchurched friend, got a phone call from her son who hadn't been to church in a year, and thought about how cute her unbaptized grandchildren looked at the birthday party last Saturday. "Thank God I found those keys," she kept saying.

Matthew sat quietly during communion. He was fuming mad. That guy Luke had gone up. What was he doing going to communion. Just a few months ago he had gotten in an accident while drunk. No one was killed, but some one could have been. Luke was a sinner. He had embarrassed his family, his church, and his God. How could he go to communion? "Communion is for worthy people; people like me," was the gist of Matthew's thought. He secretly hoped Pastor would pass Luke over.

"Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" Sinners were gathering to be taught and corrected, to be led to God. What were Israel's teachers doing? They were complaining about it. Can there be any greater tragedy than that? The church had ceased to be church and had become a showroom for the self-righteous. The unchurched gathered around Christ and His Word. The church gathered to grumble about God's grace. Here were Israel's pastors complaining that someone was calling back the straying. This would be like me reprimanding the elders of our church for making calls on those who haven't been to church in a while. This was an outrage. They were not acting as shepherds at all. Fortunately, Someone was.

Then Jesus told them this parable: *"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'"*

Let's dig into this parable. Notice the numbers. The shepherd has ninety-nine sheep still, yet he leaves them behind to look for one. He not only leaves them, but he leaves them unprotected in open pasture, the Greek says, "in the wilderness." He is consumed with the thought of the fate of the one lost sheep. We have 345 members. We had 162 in worship last week. We have 90 enrolled in Bible classes. That's good, isn't it? Are we content? I pray not. There are still sheep out there. We have 345 members. We had 162 in worship. Maybe my math is off, but that's a significant difference. What are we doing? What did the shepherd in our parable do? He went, found them, and brought them back. Are we even looking? When we find them, do we put them on our shoulders and lead them home, or do we pretend the problem

doesn't exist? Are we consumed with bringing them to God's grace, or determined to avoid the uncomfortable atmosphere such an attempt might create? Do we take them to Applebee's to eat, or do we bring them back to God's altar where the real family meal takes place?

As a sinner and a result-driven American, I have to tell you, I have been pumped up about the numbers lately, which is always a dangerous thing. When David got concerned with a census, a plague was sent on Israel. There is only one number God wants to me be consumed with, and that is the number one: the one soul that has strayed that needs a gentle hand to lead it home, the one sheep that's never known the safety of God's pen of grace, the one member who needs encouragement to long for worship more and to take advantage of Bible classes, the one lost seeker with questions that I can answer with God's promises. There is always one. And, when there's one, there is always room for rejoicing.

My friends, you are that one. You are the sheep that strayed from the fold. You were born as a lost soul, an enemy of God. Christ found you. He may have used your parents or grandparents, but someone put you on their shoulder and brought you to the font. And we rejoiced. And you rejoice. Just as the Shepherd gave your parents shoulders for carrying sheep to the fold, He has given you shoulders as well. What are you doing with them? Are you using them to bear the guilt that comes with refraining from calling back your lost family and friends out of fear, or are you using them for carrying souls to Christ. Have you self-righteously, like the Pharisees, deemed some beyond saving and thought it a waste of time to witness to them? Have you thought some were too sickly for our hospital, less important than finding worldly things, or somehow less worthy of God's grace. If you have, you've forgot that you came to God on someone's shoulders as well. Maybe it was a parent, a friend, or a relative, but regardless, the real Man beneath the shoulders was Christ and He was bringing you home. He cleaned you. He fed you. And He spoke reassuringly of His love.

I would be remiss as a pastor, as an under-shepherd of the Good Shepherd, however, if I left you with the impression that the point of this text is only to do evangelism and delinquent calls, that Jesus is only giving law exhortations. We can and should find the greatest comfort in this text. Here we see Jesus, the God of the Universe, concerned not with all the cumbersome and awesome tasks that come with being God, but with one person. What person? You. When Christ died, He saw you. When Christ rose, He longed for the day you would rise with Him. Now that Christ has ascended, He rules all things for your good, even though it's hard to believe at times. All of heaven rejoices over you. Christ would love nothing more than to set everything else aside and to graciously and mercifully deal with you, as He does in the divine service. He knows you are a sinner. He knows you are sickly. He knows you are not as impressive as many others are. And that's why He wants you. Sinners are whom He came to save. He has come to the sick with medicine. He delights in the unimpressive, because He makes the unimpressive the most impressive of all.

"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." Christ takes more joy in one sinner who acknowledges his or her sin than in ninety-nine outwardly religious and righteous people who refuse to admit they are sick. He takes delight in you. When we beg, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner," He answers, "I already have and I always will." That's not a message we can keep to ourselves. We rejoice in it too much to be silent. There's always more room for sinners on His shoulders. No one is too sinful. No one is too sick. No one is too unimpressive. Rather, they are exactly the sheep our Shepherd searches for: lost ones. Take a look at your shoulders. Who knows, one day they may be used as Christ's. Amen.