

Trinity 3

I take as my text today from St. Luke's Gospel:

And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.

Today's Gospel reading from St. Luke gives insight into a radical concept Jesus introduces to the Jewish leadership, the concept that every individual in the eyes of God is of infinite worth. It is a challenge to the inflated perception of their own self-righteousness and their disdain for those who fail to meet their expectations in life.

St. Luke provides us with two parables that are essentially part of a trilogy that includes the parable of the *Lost Sheep*, the *Lost Coin*, and the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*. The *Parable of the Prodigal Son* is read separately on the Ninth Sunday after Trinity. Notably, all three parables revolve around something lost and then found.

In reading excerpts of several sermons on the *Parable of the Lost Sheep* from the early Church Fathers, it is interesting to note that their focus was on joy, specifically the joy of having found the lost sheep and the joyful manner in which it was received back into the fold.

The scene of our Lord as the Good Shepherd and the attentiveness of the angels as they shared in his joy in the rescue of each individual soul has captured the imagination of the Church from its earliest days, and he is often depicted in works of art with sheep at his feet, looking up at him and his burden.

This passage from St. Luke, especially the vision of the shepherd carrying the lost sheep on his shoulders, so poignantly reflects God's concern for each person he has created. We are indeed so much like sheep and even with a loving shepherd, we are constantly going astray.

With his parable, Jesus turns our focus to God's love for each of his flock, of God's openness to sinners and thus provides us with a contrast to the Jewish view.

But we must be careful to keep in mind that it was not the multitude of the Jews that challenged our Lord at every turn; but, rather, it was the leadership which felt most threatened by this radical approach to the relationship between God and man, and between individuals, especially coming from someone they saw as an itinerant teacher.

Taken with their own self-righteousness, which was one of the great stumbling blocks to their acknowledging Jesus Christ as the Messiah, as the Son of God, the Pharisees and the scribes could not conceive of God as ever being receptive to the unrepentant, let alone all the despised and hated sinners, such as the publicans.

Thus, we can more easily see the confrontational circumstances which continually surrounded our Lord's exchanges with the Jews. It was completely alien to the Jewish leadership that every individual is of infinite worth and the object of God's redeeming love.

That God loves all of his Creation equally, saint and sinner alike, and desires their love in return was outside their realm of experience. That God would even want to seek out the sinner and return him to the flock was a completely alien concept to the Jewish leadership of the time.

It is just this that our Lord addresses in the two parables recounted in today's Gospel from St. Luke. They serve to teach the singular lesson of the unstinting and unsparing love of God as he seeks out every lost soul, no matter how insignificant that soul may seem, and the overwhelming joy in rescuing it from sin and evil.

In the shepherd searching for the lost sheep and then placing it upon his shoulders, we can see our Lord's work of love in pleading with the sinner and finally bringing him back into a state of grace as the sinner duly repents.

That image of Christ was further reinforced with his *Parable of the Good Shepherd*, which we read on the 2nd Sunday after Easter, where Jesus is very explicit in describing just what a good shepherd is and leaves us with no doubt about his care and concern for each of us.

The *Parable of the Lost Sheep* is the first of three which show our Lord's encouragement of penitents and his love for the outcasts and despised. The parable also rebukes the Pharisees for being such negligent shepherds when it comes to that part of the flock most in need of help. As neglectful shepherds, they are worse than the sinners they despise.

In the second parable from today's Gospel, the theme is continued in the story of the *Lost Coin* which draws our attention to the work of the Church and, again, we must understand the symbolism of the players and objects:

The woman represents the Church and the ten pieces of silver the human souls in her keeping.

The lost piece of silver represents a soul that has fallen from grace, perhaps from her negligence.

The friends and neighbors represent not only the faithful members of the Church, but also the angels who join with her, the Church, in rejoicing for the return of the lost soul, that lost piece of silver.

While the *Parable of the Lost Sheep* centers upon Christ's tenderness in reclaiming the lost souls, the parable of the *Lost Coin* turns attention to the extent to which God goes in searching out those lost sinners. The woman is unrelenting in her search, just as Christ is in bringing back the lost soul to a state of grace.

These two parables deliver a powerful message: there is no limit to God's love, no limit to his desire to redeem all of his Creation from sin and evil, and no limit to the power of his Redemptive Grace.

The message provoked a reactionary response from the Pharisees because it required a change in their thinking, a radical change.

These self-righteous men of Israel were being told they were wrong; not only wrong, but also, in the sight of God, they were no better than anyone else; they could be compared with sinners; that they who were the righteous ones of Israel could be linked with the publicans and sinners was outside their ability to comprehend, let alone accept.

From these two parables, we gain a clearer perception of God's relationship to us through this radical concept introduced by Jesus Christ: that God loves all of us, all of his Creation, and he loves each one, individually.

For the Pharisees and Jewish leadership, this concept required a radical change in how they perceived their relationship with God and their fellow man; moreover, it required a radical change in how they perceived themselves.

In this world, change is inevitable; God, however, is constant and unchanging; his love for us, his creation, is unchanging. The same today as yesterday. At the same time, to truly love God requires a radical change in us, just as with the Pharisees.

We must re-examine our values, adjust our priorities, raise our standards — our standards of Faith, of worship, of personal conduct and personal ethics, and our perception of individual worth — and lower the barriers we tend to place between us and others.

God sees us as creatures of infinite worth and he is Infinite Love expressed in his Son, through whom he has established his Fold, the Church with us as his sheep. The Church is the Body of Christ and a sphere of Grace through which we may attain salvation.

Though as sheep we may stray, our Lord is never far away; and when we are tired and weary, he will lift us up and carry us back to the fold. When we are lost, he will light a candle and sweep the house in search of us; and when we are found, even just one of us, the joy in heaven is beyond our earthly imagination.