

## Scripture Reading For Sunday September 15 2019

### Ezekiel 34:11-16 (NIV)

<sup>11</sup>“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. <sup>12</sup>As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. <sup>13</sup>I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. <sup>14</sup>I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup>I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. <sup>16</sup>I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

### Luke:15:1-10 (NIV)

<sup>15</sup> Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. <sup>2</sup> But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders <sup>6</sup> and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ <sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ <sup>10</sup> In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

## Sermon: Lost and Found

I don’t know what happens in your household, but when I have lost my keys, or my glasses, phone, or wallet, it doesn’t take long for me to start accusing others of moving them! The item is invariably found within a minute or two and I then rush out of the door in mild frustration, or relief, rather than joyous celebration. This got me to thinking of memorable past experiences of things that were *truly* “lost and found,” and whose discovery *did* result in genuine joy and celebration. One incident quickly came to

my mind. Many years ago, I was undertaking my experimental research at a national facility<sup>1</sup> and I deleted a good number of computer files that I thought I had already backed up, but hadn't. I was mortified because I had lost a weeks' worth of data collection time, but it was really much more than that, in that it corresponded to 6 months of hard work. My graduate student, Jim, knew that deleting a file did not erase it, it simply disassociates the file name with its contents so that the disc can then be overwritten. In other words, the data was still *physically* on the disc but just was not visible in the file directory. We hastily bought some special software that allowed access to the information on the physical disk and over the next couple of days painstakingly searched for digital patterns on the disc that we knew would correspond to the format of our data files. What was initially lost - and I thought lost forever - was safely retrieved! Of course, we celebrated with a pint or two and we told others that what was "lost had been found." (In fact, Jim was later employed as a forensic scientist doing the same kind of thing for criminal cases. And I became paranoid in backing everything up, multiple times!)

This incident parallels and makes vividly real the two parables for today. Before we consider them, let's remind ourselves of the context. Last week we heard what Jesus had to say to the host and guests of a prominent Pharisee who had had invited him for lunch. This week we are told that Jesus was eating with tax collectors and those whom the Pharisees and Scribes<sup>2</sup> referred to as "sinners." What this word means here is debatable, but likely *doesn't* mean that these people were morally bankrupt or were persistent in bad deeds. Rather, they were unable to keep the *high* religious standards that Pharisees expected of them either because of the kind of work they did, or because of their poverty, or because they didn't know the Law well enough to properly keep it, or because they were deemed to be hopelessly irreligious. And tax collectors were generally disliked because they were collecting money for either Herod or the Romans - and often profiting off the people in the process.<sup>3</sup> The Pharisees, known for doing everything to maintain their own ritual purity, would *not* want to associate with such outcasts.<sup>4</sup> Instead they would only view them from afar - or at least within listening distance!<sup>5</sup> We are told they were "grumbling," a word that reminds us of the murmurings of the people against Moses in the wilderness.<sup>6</sup> That's because, in their minds, it was scandalous that a prophet would debase himself and risk becoming ritually unclean by being in their company. The Pharisees would have no problem with Jesus calling "sinners" to repent; the offence was that Jesus was demonstrating God's grace by not requiring a change in behaviour before eating with them. One can therefore imagine Jesus sitting in a pub, eating and drinking with anyone present, to the annoyance of those who think that's not an appropriate place for him to be! Earlier in Luke, when Jesus was challenged in similar circumstances, he

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<sup>1</sup> This was a synchrotron radiation facility and we would be typically granted a few weeks of operational time every six months to perform experiments. See: <http://web2.uwindsor.ca/courses/physics/reddish/TJRWelcome.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Scribes, or "teachers of the Law," were literate, trained experts in the law, both civil and religious.

<sup>3</sup> Moreover, those in regular contact with Gentiles (non-Jews) would be suspect as being ritually unclean.

<sup>4</sup> See also John 7:49. As far as the Pharisees were concerned, such "sinners" were not to be trusted; you wouldn't borrow from them, wouldn't appoint one of them as the guardian of an orphan or a custodian of charitable funds, and you wouldn't accompany them on a journey. The Pharisee was forbidden to be a guest of any such person, or to have them as a guest.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 15:1.

<sup>6</sup> See Luke 5:30; 19:7; Exod 16:6-12.

said “It’s not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”<sup>7</sup> In today’s situation, Jesus tells a series of three joyful parables, though we will only consider the first two today.<sup>8</sup>

In the first parable, God is portrayed as a shepherd. We therefore might think that this would sit well with the Pharisees and experts of the Law as this image of God is often to be found in the Old Testament;<sup>9</sup> we heard of that from our reading from Ezekiel and sang about it using the well-known words of Psalm 23. However, by the 1<sup>st</sup> century, shepherds had a bad reputation as shifty, thieving, trespassing hirelings and were generally looked down upon.<sup>10</sup> They were listed amongst the despised trades by rabbis, along with camel drivers, sailors, gamblers, and tax collectors. So, for Jesus to respond to their criticism with a story about God’s role *as a shepherd* is quite pointed. Moreover, in the Old Testament, the kings and religious leaders were *also* described as “shepherds” and the prophets often critiqued them for failing to care for their sheep!<sup>11</sup> This inference can’t be overlooked. In our reading from Ezekiel 34, God has given up on Israel’s leaders and proclaims, “I myself will search for my sheep and look after them.”<sup>12</sup> And Jeremiah 23 says the same thing and then adds: “The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved . . . This is the name by which he will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.”<sup>13</sup> The *readers* of Luke’s gospel would get this association with the *identity* of Jesus, and the scribes – being Old Testament experts – should also make that connection and feel the sting of the implied criticism for failing in their duty of care.<sup>14</sup>

But there’s even more; God leaves the 99 sheep alone in the wilderness to hunt for 1 missing sheep; What shepherd would realistically do that? Yet, Jesus implies this is normal behaviour.<sup>15</sup> This seemingly foolish shepherd loves the lost sheep *so much* he is willing to risk everything, including his own life, until he finds it. And when that happens, he publicly *celebrates* with friends as the *lost* sheep is now found. Not only are the Pharisees and scribes not even *searching*, for they had written-off such “sinners,” but neither are they *celebrating* when they are found! The point being, their spirit does *not* align with what God’s values and, by implication, they are not as “righteous” as they think they are. Their cold hearts

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<sup>7</sup> Luke 5:30-31.

<sup>8</sup> See also Matt 18:12–14. Note that Jesus is addressing his critics *not* the so-called “sinners.” The 3<sup>rd</sup> story is the well-known “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” though it is really about man with *two* sons and also addressed to his critics. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Parable-of-the-Man-with-Two-Sons.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Isa 40:11.

<sup>10</sup> This is important in considering Luke’s narration of Christ’s birth with his emphasis on the lowly shepherds (Luke 2:8-18).

<sup>11</sup> See Jer 3:15; 23:1-8; Ezek 34:2–7.

<sup>12</sup> Ezek 34:11; see also Jer 23:3.

<sup>13</sup> Jer 23:5-6; see also Ezek 34:23-24. Luke makes a connection with Jesus and David as early as Luke 1:27; 2:4.

<sup>14</sup> In John 10, Jesus makes the personal link to the divine shepherd image most explicit; see:

<https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/I-am-the-Good-Shepherd.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> This is implied in Luke 15:4,8 [“doesn’t he/she (NIV); “which one of you . . . would not” (NET/NRSV) – answer: no one!]

need softening; they need to learn to rejoice in the things that truly give God pleasure.<sup>16</sup> Jesus says, “There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”<sup>17</sup> As we heard last week, such people have excluded themselves from God’s party.<sup>18</sup>

In the second parable, God is portrayed as a woman – which would also have been offensive to the Pharisees and teachers of the Law! She loses one of ten silver coins, worth a day’s wage, the loss of which would very seriously affect the family budget. Alternatively, the lost coin could have been part of a married woman’s headdress of silver coins joined together by a silver chain. This was her own property and it could not be taken away from her, even to pay a debt. Losing one of those coins would be like losing your wedding ring and naturally you would search high and low to find it. A typical house of the time had a dirt floor, possibly, a small window, and a door – obviously! It would be dark inside, which is why we are told she lit a lamp to search, and the floor may well have been covered with dried reeds. As she swept the floor, she would be looking for a glint of light or listening for a tinkle as the coin gets disturbed. Regardless, it is easy to understand her exuberant joy when the coin was found and why she would call all her female friends celebrate with her.

Jesus said *God’s* joy is like that - and no Pharisee had dreamt of a God like that. Moreover, no one would have conceived of a God who actively went *out to search* for “sinners.”<sup>19</sup> Their image of God was more like someone to whom you might crawl to in humility and, just perhaps, he might have pity on you.<sup>20</sup> Luke tells us later, in the story of the Tax collector, Zacchaeus, that Jesus “came to seek and to save the lost.”<sup>21</sup> Through these parables we are to understand that God works in ways that we find shocking; God’s generous grace is offensive to Christ’s critics.

There are several things that strike me afresh today.

First, these two parables are *not* about the “sinners.” In these stories the sheep and the coin are essentially passive and they need finding. Of course, this doesn’t negate our own need for repentance,<sup>22</sup> and which obviously involves our participation, but the stories’ emphasis is on the *initiative* and *diligence* of the searcher – the shepherd and the woman; it is *God* who does the rescuing and that is surely “good news.”

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<sup>16</sup> In other words, the repentance (U-turn) of a “sinner,” not the Pharisee’s righteousness. Like the prophet Jonah, (4:1-5), the Pharisees and scribes do not take kindly to the possible repentance of those who live outside their definition of being redeemable.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 15:7. (Of course we *all* need to repent! But that is not the point of this parable – it is not even about the “sinner”!)

<sup>18</sup> See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Upside-Down-Kingdom-of-God.pdf> .

<sup>19</sup> The connection of the coin to “sinners” is made explicit in Luke 15:10.

<sup>20</sup> This imagery is vividly portrayed in the next parable: Luke 15:11-32.

<sup>21</sup> Luke 19:10; there Jesus uses the self-referential title, “The son of man.”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus has a different idea to his critics of what “repentance” means.

Second, these stories are in direct response to the criticism of Jesus; those grumblers were provoked by the radical hospitality they were witnessing. The parables were therefore given to religious insiders – *not* outsiders. Jesus is inviting his critics to join him and the whole of heaven in celebrating the lost and found. Do *we* want to join in that party? If we don't, it means we are out of tune with *God's* reality.<sup>23</sup> Jews understood that heaven and earth are meant to fit together in harmony; we say that every week in the Lord's prayer: "Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." As far as the Jewish experts in those days were concerned, the closest you get to "heaven" was in the temple, and this required strict purity from the priestly elite. But now Jesus is declaring that heaven was having a great, noisy party every time a single "sinner" saw the light began to follow God's way. You can see why these two parables are so shocking! The upside-down kingdom of God is based on divine *mercy*, not human merit or personal holiness. Too often we want mercy for ourselves and justice for others! That begrudging, mean spirit toward those we think are somehow underserving of God's love and grace shows that it is we who are, in fact, lost to God's way of thinking!<sup>24</sup> And that surely was also an implied criticism of Jesus to his critics.<sup>25</sup> So, do *we* share in God's joy and want to be a part of the heavenly party?

This brings me to my final point: I think that an important part of that joy is that it can only happen *because of the searching*. If the cost and effort in seeking what was lost are trivial, then the joy at finding it will be equally minimal. The quality and quantity of the celebration is connected to the personal cost in diligently seeking what is highly-valued. Not only does this reveal the depth of God's love for each one of us, but his *passion* in seeking us out – one that eventually led to Christ's *passion* at Easter.

Earlier in Luke, Jesus commissioned 72 of his disciples to spread that good news ahead of him in the towns;<sup>26</sup> I spoke about this at the beginning of July.<sup>27</sup> We are told the disciples returned "with joy."<sup>28</sup> This is another example of the joy that can only happen *because of the seeking*. If we want to experience that kind of joy, one that overflows and we want to share it with others, then we have to take up Christ's commission for ourselves and persistently search for what is missing.<sup>29</sup> The pharisees did not want to participate in that search, but worse than that, they criticized Jesus for doing it! Because they grumbled at God's generous grace, they could never understand that joy. Jesus not only wants us to participate in the party, he wants us join in the searching for those who have lost their way and need someone to bring them to the Light and welcome them home. May we *all* be such people. Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>23</sup> Luke's *readers* may have had similar issues, given the mixed nature of the church as having Jews and non-Jews together.

<sup>24</sup> This also speaks to the nature of the church today, of who's "in" and who's "out." It makes us think what does it mean to be "saved" by Christ and what does it mean to be a community of Christ today?

<sup>25</sup> See also Luke 14:24, 34-35.

<sup>26</sup> See Luke 10:1-11, 16-20.

<sup>27</sup> See: <https://securerusercontent.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Harvest-is-Plentiful.pdf>; here Jesus said "the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few."

<sup>28</sup> Luke 10:17.

<sup>29</sup> This is, of course, a work of the Spirit who goes with us and before us on this divine endeavour.