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## Propers 19 (Pentecost 17) Series C 2016

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## Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 11

Finally after several weeks of tough messages from Jesus about family and sacrifice, we get the beloved parables of the lost sheep and lost coin. Time for the preacher to breathe a sigh of relief, right? Not so fast, it may not be that good. These parables have some wicked teeth to them. If you are a lost sheep or coin, they are great, but if you are one of the 99 who does not need to repent, one of those Pharisees standing on the sidelines grousing at Jesus, they are indeed a bitter pill to swallow.

Jesus is asking us here to give up what is perhaps our most treasured possession: our self-righteousness. I could give my money up, my family perhaps, almost anything. I might even be so vain to as think that I could give up my own life for the kingdom, but as I think about those things, I must admit that I am thinking of them from the vantage of selfish pride. I would like God to see my sacrifice and be impressed, even just a little bit.

The radical demand of Christ upon us takes a most radical turn this week. Jesus will tell us that we are no better than the wretches who sleep off last night's drug binge in the gutters of our cities. We are not better than the prostitutes that walk the streets in the wrong part of town or that homosexual in drag from whom we avert our eyes. Jesus will insist the only way we can get into this kingdom is as lost sheep, lost coins, and finally as lost sons. It is not a message church-going, life-long, Lutherans like me want to hear. God is not going to notice my days spent teaching Sunday School or the checks I have put into the plate or the countless Sundays I rolled out bed to attend church, perhaps willingly, perhaps begrudgingly. When it comes to giving his love and favor, God just is not going to notice all that, or at least not pay me for it.

I once heard a preacher say that he wanted to free us from our vices and our virtues. The first one is easy. Everyone wants to be free of vices, but the latter is much harder. We can hardly imagine that our virtues would stand in the way. But Jesus gives the kingdom of heaven to sinners and tax collectors while the "righteous" scribes and Pharisees are rebuked. This will get even odder next week as he commends the dishonest steward in Luke 16. The whole world is turned upside down.

Yes, the whole world is turned upside down and we really ought to praise God for it. The terror of our own self-righteousness is that we cannot even meet the minimal standards that we set! Our only hope is graciousness, the loving embrace of a father who has waited and watched on his porch for the prodigal to return, the joyful ride home on the shoulders of our good shepherd, the tender caress of a God who has found us, dirty and covered in filth under the cosmic garbage can.

It is a truth we often have heard, but do we really understand its implications for our church going members and even for ourselves? I am not sure. It is a terrible truth with frightening implications. Our treasurers might gulp a little at this. If everyone actually believes that God really does not pay us for our good deeds, will anyone even come to church next week? **If they are not a little guilty about skipping services to play golf will our pews be empty?** How does

it change my own life to know that the wretch who sits in my office this week feeding me a cock-and-bull story about his broken down vehicle, a job in Seattle, and a cousin who will send me the money back as soon as he gets there, how does it change my life that this guy is no worse than me? I know he is lying to me. There is no job in Seattle; I will never see a dime of this money again. There is a very good chance that anything I give him will be converted to alcohol or worse. Am I really no better than that guy? Jesus' brutal words today are that I am indeed, on the divine scales, no better than the scoundrel. What is even odder, I really don't want to insist that I am.

But still, if I am no better than that guy, do I give him any money?

In the past we have dwelt on our expectations: When we preach the lost sheep or lost coin parable, what do people expect to hear from those words?

1. I am part of the 99 and someone really ought to get out there and find that lost guy – but that someone is not a fellow sheep like me. It should be the shepherd – do they expect to hear their pastoral expectations reinforced? Do our expectations of this parable forget that Jesus uses each of us as his hands and feet to find the lost?
2. If we avoid the first expectation, we might come to Jesus loves everyone – even the lost sinful types. This is an evangelism text and we are supposed to look for that lost guy like the shepherd or woman in the parable.
3. God loves to restore lost people and rejoices when sinners are forgiven. I am supposed to like that too and should be out there looking for the lost guys.

Are you hearing a lot of self-imposed moralizing/works in this? I am.

What should they hear? What is contrary to their expectation but in the parable?

1. Let's have more parties, especially parties for sinners found and restored. We should be the party church in town.
2. The hearers are the lost ones. One can be just as lost in our self-righteous indignation as anyone who has made a trainwreck of his/her life. Jesus has coming to look for me and them.
3. Jesus preaches these words to two audiences, yes – lost sheep and coins, the sinners sitting at his feet. But he also preaches to the judgmental, church attending Pharisees who are standing on the edge of this scene with arms crossed and faces scowling. Today, the Church too often looks like this. Are these parables parable of Law or Gospel? If you take the final words of both parables, Jesus interpretation of them, the parables are directed against a self-righteous, judgmental community of believers.

Why should they care? How does any of this have anything to do with the real lives that they are being called to live right now? Shouldn't we just preach on the five steps to being a better parent, or something like that? What happens when we don't "get" what Jesus is saying here?

1. The Pharisees self-assured sense of their own rectitude will serve to isolate them and keep them from Jesus and his Kingdom. This is a God problem.
2. The older brother in the third parable doesn't get to party. This life lacks joy.
3. Experience tells us that when we carry around these grudges/anger you get to live it over and over again and that is a pretty ugly, painful place to be and such a person is always an ugly person to be with. The beautiful life God has called us to one in which we are freed from this burden.

For the Lutheran this tension of sinner/saint and Law/Gospel is very helpful. It is true that Jesus died for even my best moments, the times when I taught Sunday School and sang in the choir. But having said that sin pervades all of my life, I also get to say that Christ's forgiveness is not just for the naughty moments, but for the whole thing. We are rewarded in heaven for good deeds, because Christ, who lives in me (Gal. 2:20), is at work in me. So now, whether the world approves of my deeds or not, even if I don't approve of them all the time, or even if they are not wholly pure and rightly motivated, Christ can still work through them. Heaven sees and does love them, not because I got it right, but because Christ has taken them to himself.

### **Collect of the Day**

Lord Jesus, You are the Good Shepherd, without whom nothing is secure. Rescue and preserve us that we may not be lost forever but follow You, rejoicing in the way that leads to eternal life; for You live and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*Lord Jesus, no great ascription of might and eternity, but the more terrible ascription of this relationship to me. He is my Lord. My loyalty, my service, even my life itself are all owed to Him. These prayers addressed to Jesus actually come from the Gallican tradition of the liturgy which was far more emotional and florid than the austere Roman tradition of the first millennium AD. The first emperors of the Holy Roman Empire brought these with them to Rome when they tried to clean up the mess the papacy had made of things in the late 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. They probably started as an attempt by the Gallic (French) church to counter the Arian tendencies of their Gothic lords after the fall of the Roman Empire in the west. They prayed straight to Jesus as a way of confessing that Jesus really was God. The Arians, if you remember your theological history, insisted that Jesus was only the first creation and thus not really someone to whom you would pray.*

*Jesus is the Good Shepherd who rescues and preserves people. This is not preserve as in another word for jam; this is preserve as in a life preserver. We want to be rescued and preserved so we are not lost forever. The prayer assumes that without the immediate action of the Savior our goose is pretty well cooked in the fires of hell. That is probably not what most of our folks are thinking these days. We are pretty sure that we are well along the way of eternal life, rejoicing at*

*least at Christmas and Easter. For many, that will be the only time one really needs to come and celebrate.*

*The prayer makes no such assumption. In fact, it seems to assume the opposite. Our default course, without Jesus' intervention, is hell-bound. Our status is as the lost. At least, according to these readings, that is exactly where we want to be. Our rescuer and preserver is great at finding, saving, and bringing home the lost. As Robert Capon said, he came to raise the dead, not buy drinks for the marginally alive, so admit you are dead already!*

*Ezekiel 34:11-24 The imagery of this chapter is somewhat muddled, or at least it is a metaphor which is pushed far beyond what my high school English teacher would have thought appropriate. I have included the whole chapter for us because it runs throughout.*

*The word of the LORD came to me: <sup>2</sup> "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup> You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup> The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. <sup>5</sup> So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. <sup>6</sup> My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.*

*<sup>7</sup> "Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: <sup>8</sup> As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep, <sup>9</sup> therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: <sup>10</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.*

*<sup>11</sup> "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup> As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. <sup>13</sup> And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. <sup>14</sup> I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. <sup>16</sup> I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up*

the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

<sup>17</sup>“As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. <sup>18</sup>Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? <sup>19</sup>And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

<sup>20</sup>“Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. <sup>21</sup>Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, <sup>22</sup>I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. <sup>23</sup>And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup>And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

<sup>25</sup> “*I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild beasts from the land, so that they may dwell securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. <sup>26</sup>And I will make them and the places all around my hill a blessing, and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing. <sup>27</sup>And the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase, and they shall be secure in their land. And they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke, and deliver them from the hand of those who enslaved them. <sup>28</sup>They shall no more be a prey to the nations, nor shall the beasts of the land devour them. They shall dwell securely, and none shall make them afraid. <sup>29</sup>And I will provide for them renowned plantations so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land, and no longer suffer the reproach of the nations. <sup>30</sup>And they shall know that I am the LORD their God with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Lord GOD. <sup>31</sup>And you are my sheep, human sheep of my pasture, and I am your God, declares the Lord GOD.”*

*Some Preaching Points for this passage:*

- 1. We want the folks to take to heart that the Lord judges how we treat one another. God sees when people turn church and relationships into places of sinful exercises of power and domination.*
- 2. We want folks to see that God himself intervenes. God doesn't delegate salvation.*
- 3. We don't get away with anything.*
- 4. Vs 31 – We are the human sheep of God's pasture.*

*We thought that the final verses were necessary to cast the vision of what it means that God will be the shepherd who delivers us. The first part asserts that he does it, but these omitted verses really tell us what that looks like and captures the imagination of the hearer better.*

*Notice that God is the actor in all of this. We think of the incarnation and properly so, but the incarnation does not end with Jesus ascent into heaven; it continues through us today. When I*

*forgive, does not Jesus say to us that we forgive with his words? Who is rescuing the lost sheep when I am the preacher who preaches and the shepherd who seeks out the lost? It is not me who saves, it is always Jesus who saves. The shepherd has to remember that or he will suffer from the great medieval vice of pride against which Jesus has already spoken. I take this to mean that God is empowering the ministry of his people. The pastor or deacon who speaks and acts in Jesus' name has the promise found here that God is active, doing this work. I cannot save, my words are meager, my deeds are weak, but he is strong and able.*

*For a vacancy situation this can also be a really good message. The under-shepherd might be called away, the man may die or leave for a variety of reasons, but the real shepherd makes a promise here. He will not leave his scattered people. The real shepherd whose words and deeds lent strength and power and grace and love to every pastor's sermon will never leave.*

*The image of shepherd is an ancient image. It was not invented by Jesus in the Gospels, but he had sown it throughout Middle Eastern cultures for over a thousand years prior to his birth in Bethlehem. Along with Psalm 23, Ezekiel develops this picture extensively in the OT. We also know that non-Israelite people in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Asia Minor used this image to speak of their gods and their rulers. The title for the Moabite king was "shepherd" hence Ezekiel is tapping into a very common language here, one which we may find somewhat alien, but which should be more familiar to us. The idea is that the king (shepherd) and the people (sheep) have a mutual relationship of responsibilities and obligations to one another. If the shepherd does not take care of the sheep, he will not long be a shepherd. I think the events of the Arab Spring of the past several years are actually a continuing witness to this. The peoples of Tunisia, Lybia, Egypt, and Syria, to name a few, were not being well shepherded. Eventually this becomes intolerable and the king/ruler is ousted. It happened in the ancient world too.*

*The words of our reading may seem like pretty good news, God takes the side of the poor and weak sheep who have been kicked out, but I really think this might be scarier than we know. For the judgment is not between sheep and wolves but between the sheep and sheep. Here Ezekiel is mixing his metaphors and my English teacher would not have approved. The fat ones who have drunk deep from the waters and feasted on the fare of heaven have also been shouldering out some folks, muddying the water, trampling the grass, etc.*

*What is Ezekiel really talking about here, especially as we would consider our own task as preachers? Is that a picture of the church today? Too many have an idea that the church is cold and uninviting. If you have not read the book entitled "UnChristian" you might want to. It recounts some rather scary ideas about what young people think of us. Too many have had their tender faith stepped on by the arrogance and pride of those who wear crosses and knelt at communion rails with them. By the time we have gotten around to forgiving our neighbors, it does look a little like the second hand grass that Ezekiel describes, stepped on and sullied under foot. Have we stood on the mountains and whispered the good news, opened our doors and glowered at the folks who came through and cursed the stream of cars that don't turn into our*

*parking lot? Is there room in our church for God to bring in the multitudes as he has done in the past? What if he did? Would you be at all ready for that?*

*In Utah I used to challenge my congregation that God could lead the prophet of Mormonism to declare that the Lutherans were right and they should all come to the Lutheran church tomorrow and seek wisdom. What would you say? Are you ready for that? Would you be willing to welcome them, even them? Would you be willing to teach them? What if they taught you a few things? For all of us this hits home. What if he brought the person who has hurt you to church? Is the blood of Jesus big enough to cover that sinner and his sin? If it isn't, we really have to ask if the blood of Jesus is big enough to cover you.*

*God loves all the people of the earth, the Hindus in distant lands and the Scientologist or Druid wannabe that lives down your street. God's judgment of me and my attitudes here seems harsh and it is.*

*The good news is that the shepherd who leads the flock is none other than Christ himself. We would make a terrible country club of this, only admitting our own sorts of people into membership until it would probably boil down to me and thee and I would not be too certain about thee. Jesus has a way of blasting this apart. The church that does not reach into its community will soon find itself dying, as many of our LCMS congregations slowly drift into irrelevance within their own communities. His kingdom still comes however and people continue to be drawn to his cross. It just might not be an LCMS cross they gather under. But he will shepherd his people. We may fail, but he does not. My family, my loved ones, my world is in his hands. This doesn't all hang on me getting it right, but it rests in his hands.*

*The church of today is not different than the church of Ezekiel's day those centuries ago. The answers are not really to be found in the proper program or the preacher browbeating his folks into the right attitude. The answer was then, and remains today, the Davidic Lord, the same Jesus who stands and shepherds the flock, the great good shepherd whom God has raised from the dead. We could proclaim that shepherd today and do well, but I think our attention will actually be drawn to the Gospel reading today. But beware, this is not as sweet as it sounds.*

Psalm 119:169-176

## **Taw**

<sup>169</sup> Let my cry come before you, O LORD;  
give me understanding according to your word!

<sup>170</sup> Let my plea come before you;  
deliver me according to your word.

<sup>171</sup> My lips will pour forth praise,  
for you teach me your statutes.

<sup>172</sup> My tongue will sing of your word,



for all your commandments are right.  
<sup>173</sup> Let your hand be ready to help me,  
for I have chosen your precepts.  
<sup>174</sup> I long for your salvation, O LORD,  
and your law is my delight.  
<sup>175</sup> Let my soul live and praise you,  
and let your rules help me.  
<sup>176</sup> I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant,  
for I do not forget your commandments.

*As we have noted before, Psalm 119 is an acrostic, the lines in each section begin with the letter of the alphabet, in this instance, a Tav, the final letter of the Hebrew alphabet since this is the final section of the psalm. Ancient writers often reserved their most eloquent or potent material for the last section of their work. Notice the final line.*

I Timothy 1: (5-11) 12-17

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,*

*<sup>2</sup> To Timothy, my true child in the faith:*

*Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.*

*<sup>3</sup> As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, <sup>4</sup> nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith. <sup>5</sup> The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. <sup>6</sup> Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, <sup>7</sup> desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.*

*<sup>8</sup> Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, <sup>9</sup> understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, <sup>10</sup> the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, <sup>11</sup> in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.*

*<sup>12</sup> I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, <sup>13</sup> though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, <sup>14</sup> and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. <sup>16</sup> But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to*

believe in him for eternal life. <sup>17</sup> To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

*Verse 15 is the confession of the person who has heard and thoroughly internalized the parables of Luke 15.*

*We swim for a few weeks in Paul's first letter to Timothy. As you read it, understand that it was not probably intended only for Timothy's ears, but also for the congregation in Ephesus which he was being sent to serve. It would have been read at his installation. Can you imagine having this read at your installation? What would have that sounded like to you and to the people you serve?*

*I think that the post-modern church needs to hear and really take to heart the first paragraph of this reading. In our quest for truth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we have often made far too many confident assertions of the truth. This has led us to believe that we have it and others do not. The arrogance of that sort of thinking and doing is exceptionally off-putting to people today. They are not usually attracted to such a church; although, I have to admit that a population of such people continues to this day. Will the synod or my congregation thrive by providing ever more specific answers to questions or will we sometime have to admit we don't know?*

*For the theme of this Sunday, however, we will likely focus on the line which we all know well. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. This is not just Paul speaking with hyperbole, he really means this. And indeed all of us can join Him in this assertion. This is a trustworthy and true saying for every one of us. I know some of your sins but I know all of mine. When I look around me and consider all the folks I know, the biggest sinner I know is always the one who looks back at me from the bathroom mirror. I am the greatest of sinners from a purely existential point of view. I am no mass murderer, but what I find boiling down inside my own heart and head does not exactly encourage me to say that I am any better.*

*My older brother, not one of the clergy among my siblings, mind you, used to sing a slightly altered version of the old hymn "Chief of Sinners." His version went something like this: "Chief of sinners, though you be, there is no hope for thee." It got to the point in our house that all he had to do was hum it and we all knew what he meant. How I like to change that pronoun to "you" instead of "I"*

*But Paul's assertion that he is the greatest of sinners will be essential to the Gospel lesson today. Paul received mercy and so did we in order that the perfect patience of Jesus might be shown and some may come to believe in him for eternal life. That is the governing motif of our lives. Thus I have to say that Rick Warren is a piker with his 40 days of purpose! It is a whole life of purpose to which we are called. Our whole life is a giant illustration of God's mercy and grace. Paul had indeed been a persecutor of God's people. But that only now served to make God's graciousness and mercy greater and more glorious.*

*The preacher who is considering the other lessons, the shepherding themes, might do well to remember the Paul is writing to a young pastor (shepherd) and that Paul here is really*

*embodying the very thing that Jesus is aiming for in the Gospel reading. He was a Pharisee. He did not think that any prophet or teacher of God should be hanging around with the sinners and tax collectors. He went to terrible lengths to persecute, and yet God took him from a horse's back and laid him flat on the ground. God turned him around and made him into the very exemplar of the scandalous grace of God which had so angered him.*

Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. <sup>6</sup> And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' <sup>7</sup> Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

<sup>8</sup> "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' <sup>10</sup> Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

<sup>11</sup> And he said, "There was a man who had two sons..."

*Now we get to the real meat of this week and the text which one can hardly avoid, the parables of lost sheep and lost coin.*

*Lost sheep are a real problem for shepherds. Sheep are not really stupid animals, in fact they are quite intelligent as far as barn yard denizens go. Their problem is their eyesight is poor. They cannot see very far at all. They can hear well and smell fairly well, but they often cannot see a hazard that is right in front of them. Thus a shepherd constantly has to watch them and when they get in trouble, they often will not be able to see the way out.*

*The image of the lost coin may have an even larger significance than simply a lost bit of coinage. Remember that in the ancient world there was no paper money nor any checks. If you have liquid, monetary wealth it was in coin, silver, gold, bronze, and copper. The result is that a coin could be a large sum – a man who labored all day was paid in a single coin. At minimum wage, that is \$80-\$100 for a denarius. There were even more valuable coins.*

*But this may have had even more value to her personally, emotional value. The woman's lost coin was likely part of her dowry, a gift to her from her parents. It functioned as something of an insurance policy for her. If her husband neglected her or mistreated her, it was a cushion which was hers and nobody could take it from her. She probably wore these ten coins as a piece of jewelry around her neck. You can visit the Nelson Art Gallery in Kansas City, MO next time you*

are driving through and see their fine collection of these beautiful necklaces. This coin may have been a large sum of money and it likely was a gift from her parents. It is no wonder she reacted the way she did when she looked down to check her necklace and noticed one of them missing.

But even more important than the cultural back ground of these parables is the context in which we find them spoken, not the scriptural context but the relational context in which Jesus spoke. Jesus is gathering lots of people around him and not many of them are the right sort of people. They are sinners and tax collectors. He clearly has not read the manual on the proper behavior for Messiahs. The church-going sorts of people complain and grumble about this and to their complaint Jesus utters these parables and most damningly he interprets them.

You really almost have to imagine the scene. At Jesus' feet sit the outcasts, the sinners and tax collectors. These people who know they have completely messed up their lives. They hang on every word that Jesus says. He has welcomed them into his fellowship. For them the really good news is that God is happy to see them. The Jewish culture was really good at telling them that they did not belong. Jesus tells them that God is happy to see them; the heavens rejoice at your presence, the angels are happy, God is happy.

Standing at the edge of the crowd, arms crossed, frowns firmly in place, mutter the scribes and Pharisees. They are clearly unhappy. Jesus tells these parables so both audiences can hear and addresses them to both of these audiences.

Luke is taking us somewhere and unfortunately our pericope doesn't get us all the way there but we can read all the way to the end of the chapter. Pay close attention to Jesus's interpretation of the parables: After the parable of the lost sheep he says **<sup>7</sup>Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.** Imagine being one of the sinners at Jesus feet when you hear this. Hurray! Heaven rejoices that I am here right now. But imagine also being one of the Pharisees who hears that. They are standing on the edge of the scene angry and scowling. They are not happy. Jesus has just told them that there is joy in heaven. But they have no joy right now. Their lack of joy at God's delight has placed them outside of heaven. He has just told them that they are outside of God's party, forced to look in like some uninvited outcast. This gets even worse after the next parable. **<sup>10</sup>Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."**

Now Jesus says that the angels, the servants of God, are rejoicing, but the Pharisees are not. If you want to be very particular it even gets worse. Who is always before the angels of God? To whom is their face always turned? Has Jesus just told them that they are not only out of step with heaven but they are also not true servants of God? I think so. God is happy and they are not, just who has the problem here?

Notice the progression in these texts and the parable of the Prodigal which follows them. The relative value of the lost increases with each parable.

Lost Sheep 1/100 lost

Lost Coin 1/10 lost

Prodigal 1/2 lost (actually, the more closely attentive reading reveals that both are lost)

*That the preacher should hear and understand the next parable is essential to preaching these first two. The Lost Son, or parable of the Prodigal as many of us know it ends with the elder brother standing on the outside looking in and refusing to enter the party because he cannot abide that the prodigal has been welcomed back. He looks like the Pharisees and Scribes here. His crabbiness ends up being a form of self-exclusion with terrible consequences. The father pleads with the elder brother to enter the party and celebrate. He has to celebrate, the son was dead and is alive, lost and found. Heaven and its people will simply celebrate when sinners repent and you get the idea the celebration will redouble if the elder brother joins in. Now two lost sons will be received home.*

*I think we often are pretty hard on judgmental people, and rightly so. They are a problem and the judgmental Christians who hurl insults instead of God's gracious love at homosexuals, evolutionary biology types, abortionists, etc., do immense harm to the preaching of the Gospel. But it is also quite possible to become extremely judgmental about judgmentalism in a bizarre, almost humorous little circle. "I hate judgmental people!" is really a joke, is it not? Jesus does not hate the haters, he does not judge the judgers, the parable ends with Jesus pleading with all elder brothers who are scowling at him over the heads of the sinners at his feet. He wants them to come and join the party, he really does. They all need and get the same Jesus.*

*Thus I think it is sheer genius and absolutely critical to its meaning that that this string of parables does not really conclude. The parable of the Lost Sons leaves you hanging. We don't know whether the elder son comes in. The parable ends with Jesus standing there, holding his hand out to these guys, asking them to come and sit down beside these same tax collectors and sinners. In so doing, Jesus is offering to the Pharisees the hospitality they do not deserve just as much as the sinners at his feet do not deserve it.*

*All of us are saved by grace. It is a scandalous thing to say, but the sweet little old lady who volunteers every day to read with kindergarteners is just as needful of grace as the rapist or murderer who is rotting in a cell somewhere. What is even more scandalous is that God gives it to them both. Are our people really ready to hear this? Don't be so sure. You might want to preach with track shoes on this week in order to make a quick get-away. If you nail this sermon there may well be some folks who are very angry with you. You will have poked them where it hurts.*

*How will we preach this scandalous Gospel on this day?*

- 1. We want our people to hear a message of God's love for the people that God loves – that is all of them. That scandalous love of God can make us pretty uncomfortable, but God still loves.*
- 2. In order for that scandalous love to flow through us we need to be freed from our own need to earn our salvation. The only way we can step out of the ranks of the Pharisees and scribes is first to be a person for whom God has unconditionally given himself in love. When my status before God no longer depends on what I have done, then I am freed*

*to see beyond the sins of others and love with God's amazing love. If I think that God has loved me because I got something right, I am ever enslaved to that rectitude.*

- 3. We really want people to hear that God delights in our repentance and rejoices to forgive our sins. It is not that God wants us to sin, but he is never tired of hearing us come to him for what he loves to give. He delights in forgiving people. This is hard for us. We get tired of someone who says that he or she will do better but never does. We imagine that God must be tired of my repeated confessions. But he is not. He is never tired of forgiving me.*

## **Law**

1. We have been lost. Every sin makes us lost. Our death would lose us in the grave's corruption. Our ailments of body, soul, society, and work all are symptoms of our lost-ness. This is not just moral, but our whole condition reflects our lost-ness.
2. Sheep get lost one blade of grass at a time, they nibble their way into lostness, rarely do they intentionally go running off. Our inattentiveness to our own lives has often been the problem. We have not listened to the shepherd and as a result often we find ourselves surrounded by wolves or falling into some pit. What is so stupid is that if we just listened to those Ten Commandments and tried our best to keep them, most of the world's problems and our problems really would go away.
3. Coins sit there in dark corners and often don't know they are lost and can't do anything about it anyway. Voiceless and unfeeling, they are inert over against their lost-ness. That old penny we find in our lawn doesn't even know it is dirty and lost. It has to be found. It is utterly passive.
4. Too often we have looked like the Pharisees in this text. God has been about some great, gracious work and we find ourselves peering through heaven's fence, angry that they are having fun and wondering why we are stuck out here. Lost in our own self-righteousness we think we are found (like the coin) not even thinking that our own decisions and attitudes have brought us here.
5. Our pharisaical attitude is not approved of by God. Quite to the contrary, we will be held accountable (Ezekiel). God's will is clear in this regard. He wants all to be saved. If our doors are not open to all, our heart is not in line with God's heart and the doors of heavenly joy are closed to us. In Phil's plumbing metaphor of the Gospel, there is a valve which cuts off the flow of forgiveness; the horror of it is that it is located between us and God, not between ourselves and the sinner we cannot forgive.

## **Gospel**

1. The shepherd looks for lost sheep and finds them. Our sins do not permanently cut us off from God, but he bridges the gap, while we were still enemies he dies for us. His

- blood pays the price. The lost sheep is borne home. Even persecutors like Saul of Tarsus meet Jesus sometime.
2. God rejoices to bring home the sheep. They are all really important to him. It is not begrudgingly that he opens the door for us, but he shames himself, enduring the scorn of cross and humiliation of the grave, so that he might run out and embrace us on the road or come out to us in the shadows of the garden as we angrily skulk at the edges of the party.
  3. God even loves the self-righteous. The harsh words which notice that we are outside the kingdom burst open the gates as well. They are spoken by the same Jesus who extends his arms to Pharisees of every age, beckoning and inviting them to set aside their grumpiness and simply to rejoice in the graciousness of God shown to every sinner, including them.
  4. The son who was dead is alive, the shepherd has laid down his life for the sheep, the Lord tends his flock. This is an act of God, not of men. Only the one man, the singular man, Jesus of Nazareth who is both God and man, can do this. His very nature means that his death has meaning for the sins of this whole world, including the sins that I find it difficult to forgive. The sins in my own heart and the sins in the lives of others. Our lives are covered by an amazing graciousness of God.
  5. We as preachers are instruments of His grace, and it is his grace, not my grace. He tends his flock.
  6. This graciousness in turn creates in us, with the same word that created light that very first day, a new love and a new outlook on life. We really can love with his love because he has poured his love into our hearts abundantly and that means we can rejoice with God over every sinner whom he has rescued. Jesus' invitation was not only to rejoice in the salvation of sinners, as good as that it, it also is an invitation to be the servants of God. The thing that brings God the greatest joy is to hear another sinner repent of their sins. He has not sent angels to do that task, he has not placed great neon signs in the sky calling people to repent, he has sent you and me. And it was a perfect decision on his part. What better way to call sinners than with sinners who have been un-sinned, forgiven of them all. As long as we remember where we came from, our witness becomes really powerful.

### **Sermon Ideas**

1. God's Scandalously Joyful Love (Gospel lesson – that the hearer would believe that God's joy is most fully expressed when his precious children are received into his gracious embrace, no matter their sin.)

This sermon is really for the person who struggles with the mechanism of God's grace, and its scandalous implications. On a congregational level, this sermon is for the country

club church who is struggling to reach into the full breadth of its community. As human beings we are natural bean counters. This is reinforced by the world in which we live. We need that sort of attitude to deal with the folks out in the world. After all, when I buy a shirt at Penney's, I expect change and a proper accounting of the cash.

But such bean counting doesn't work when we turn our attention to God and his ways. He simply defies the bean counting and score keeping which are so ingrained into our nature. The preacher may want to reference the Isaiah 55 text in which he asserts that God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts, indeed they are as much higher as the heavens are above the earth.

We might be disheartened to be so out of touch with God's ways, except for the joy factor. The surrounding culture is quick to condemn what it deems "intolerance." But its intolerance of intolerant people is self-defeating and finally will collapse under its own weight. In mean time, however, we are told what terrible people we are. When we realize that we are out of step with him, God smiles, and rejoices at our repentance too. The solution to our salvation is not ours, it is his, and it is scandalous in its simplicity. He simply refuses to keep score. Jesus has completely evened the score in the cross, in fact we have a positive balance which cannot be exhausted. It can be rather disconcerting at times, even frightening for the accountant that lives in all of us, but he manages rather well with this system, and it is the essential ingredient to my own salvation, so I will just have to let him be.

God simply loves to welcome a sinner in his embrace. His love for his people is so deep and wide, high and broad (Ephesians 3) that we are stunned by it, but it is not like we are stunned by something bad, we are amazed at something really, really, really good!

The person who is a bean counter, who thinks God is a bean counter too, often finds that such a dreary, bean-counting faith is without energy. Being a scale-balancing bean counter sucks me dry. On the other hand, grace empowers the Christian life. When we think God is counting beans, we are never entirely certain that we are "in" and so we don't really have much to tell someone about. It is simply a state of uncertainty into which I find it very hard to invite a friend. Thus my evangelism is empty and most often simply not done. It is when the bean counting comes to an end, when the score is evened completely by Christ, that suddenly my past stops mattering so much and freed of its burden I can go out those doors and be something else.

So the Christian walks out of this door with eyes wide to see something else in this world, something sweet and good. God's great love for broken folks is still at work. You will want an example of this. Perhaps you have a dramatic one from your own experience, or better, one from the shared experience of the congregation and its members. In a pinch tell the famous stories of John Newton (author of Amazing Grace) or Chuck Colson (former advisor to Nixon and founder of Prison Ministry Fellowship after he was released from the penitentiary.)



The goal really will be that the hearer believes that this is the way that God does things, it is a good way, it is the way of my salvation, and I might just get to see it happen today.

The challenge of this sermon is to end it well. Jesus took this to the parable of the lost sons but we don't get there. How will we finish? How will we make this for the hearer when it is really, even in Jesus own schema, not quite the end of the story?

- a. A story is always the best way to do this. This might be a good moment for one of the stories of people whom the Gospel has changed. This should be a story of grace, someone getting not what they deserve but something much better. A young man who instead of going to jail gets help or something like that.
- b. We might want to talk about the outcast beloved – just whom your people will see this way will vary, but perhaps it is the terrorist, the Moslem, the homosexual, someone whom your people would perhaps consign to the “lost” category and let them see this person through new eyes, the eyes of God's holy and joyful love for them. This will be a moment when put into a difficult situation the whole group realizes that they are all the beloved children of God, brothers in their humanity, the recipients of God's grace.

We have heard this week a cold blooded killer describe the sexual assault and murder of a 12 year old boy in 1989. He coldly and calmly described putting a gun to a weeping child's head and pulling the trigger. I cannot say what is in the man's heart in relationship to God, but I can say that this horrible man's sins are not greater than the love of God in Christ Jesus. That is hard to hear and if you have a person in your congregation who has undergone the disappearance of a child, you may want to be careful here, but it is the shocking truth.

Paul was another guy whom people found it difficult to believe that Jesus could love him too. One could simply read the end of the Timothy passage above.

2. Don't ya just hate judgmental people!?! (Gospel lesson – that the hearer would hear God's rebuke of their own judgmental attitude and also Jesus' pleading love that he/she join heaven's celebration of repentance.)

This sermon potentially would be a great way to “hook” people, setting up judgmentalism as a terrible sin which when they are foaming at the mouth about it, we turn the mirror on them and they realize that this has been about them the whole time. The sermon has to be careful to make sure the gospel gets in there. The hook can be so effective that they never actually make it back! This may be best if we simply extend the reading through the sermon to tell the story of the older brother at the end of the prodigal. It is surprising, really surprising that the father reaches out to the older brother. He doesn't slam the door on him like we would expect a Middle Eastern father to do.

This sermon targets the judgmental sort of Christian, and there are plenty of those. You would not believe how many of my students after Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005 admitted they thought the New Orleans residents deserved it for their sins. They rather puckered when I told them that Portland had the nation's largest naked bicycle parade and we were built on the flanks of an active volcano. I am sure that more than a few of our parishioners have been clucking their tongues at the various examples of misery around the world which bombard us in the news. California probably deserves those fires for immorality. Are you not surprised that the Middle East is blowing up? They are Moslems, after all.

Jesus rejects such an attitude and the ensuing thoughts today. God does not judge people that way and if we do, we are simply out of step with his kingdom, his servants, and most importantly we are out of step with his joy.

This is hard for us. We seemed to be hardwired, programmed to think that there is something about me that makes me somehow just a little more lovable than the poor sap who is heading to hell. We would like to think that it is important that I kept at least a few of the rules or got a few things right. Jesus will not allow us to keep that conceit today. God's love has never been for sale. He never gives in response to something I have done, but only in response to my crushing need. It is scandalous grace that has saved me and you. If it is not scandalous, it is not really grace. If God's love is given in response to anything that I have done, it is not grace. If it is not about what I have done, God can and does give it to the scoundrel, the sinner, the Moslem, even the terrorist, the guy who makes my life miserable at work, and the bully in school of whom I am afraid.

What has to go in such a scandalous graciousness is a sort of spiritual pride and judgment which would ever look down the nose at an egregious sinner and despise them. No one is outside the love of God. That is so easy to say but so hard to believe and harder to live.

Here we have to take a little excursus. We might be in a position in life in which we have to evaluate someone. Teachers do, in fact most positions involve some sort of judgment of another human being, his or her work and performance. Just think about a bricklayer with an apprentice. But this is not the sort of spiritually judgmental attitude that this sermon addresses. And I think this distinction is necessary. These texts and their message of "don't judge" can become an excuse for sloppy work. Remember the Christian shoe maker is not discerned because he uses crosses for buckles but because he makes the best shoes.

This spiritually judgmental attitude shows up in a deficit of joy and love. Jesus points to the failure of joy on the part of the Pharisees today. Today this is often a sort of institutional covetousness. Do we rejoice every time a person comes to faith, even when they are not a member of this congregation? Do we have individuals whose presence in our own congregation is not really welcome? There are those whose presence in our doors might be a problem for us.

Such attitudes are a serious spiritual problem, which is why the gospel is found today not in the words of Jesus so much as in the actions of Jesus. He could have simply turned his back on the grumbling Pharisees. These guys would eventually kill him. He knew that. It would have been simpler just to ignore them, but he cannot. He has love for the judgmental types as well. He stands with his hands extended to grumpy folks like us today. His invitation is to sit down with the stinkers and sinners over every stripe and rejoice that we are all bathed in the same gracious love of God.

3. God shepherds his people (OT – That the congregation of believers who are in vacancy or in some turmoil over their pastoral office would hear and believe the good news that God has sent his Son to be their shepherd.)

This sermon wants to calm troubled hearts. The office of ministry is always bigger than the man who fills it. Jesus reaches out through human beings, empowering their words and deeds, but he never limits himself to one or another such person. He remains, even when they must die or leave or disappoint us. He cares about the little and often neglected sheep. He sees their hurts and does something for them and about them. That aid may come from surprising quarters.

The congregation which is struggling with a crisis or simply a conflict with its preacher may well feel as if they are being punished or that they have no shepherd. Who is watching out for them? Who is carrying them home when they have strayed? Who is leading them to quiet waters and green pastures? The preacher will need to articulate this fear and anxiety. The congregant may not be able to do so. It will help to have a sort of laundry list of things that Jesus does through people as he cares for them.

It will also be important to remember and remind the people that God has always worked through the very flawed and broken human beings that he calls. Peter could put his foot in his mouth. Paul appears to have been a little short-tempered. David was an adulterer and murderer. Expecting the instrument of God's work in our midst to be perfect is not reading your text carefully. God uses the very sinful human beings he forgives to be the instruments of his gracious care and love.

But his care is expressed through more than those who simply hold the office of Pastor. It might even be expressed through you. The preacher will want to hold up the community in this. We are in the very capable hands of a shepherd who never loses sight of the little harassed sheep. I don't know exactly what that will mean for us, but I am confident of God's gracious and loving care for his flock.

Ezekiel sees a terrible time when shepherds were abusing the sheep, when the sheep themselves were cruelly treating one another. It was a grim situation. The person who was looking at such a time and place must have felt that God had abandoned them. Ezekiel wants them and us to know this truth – God has never left his people. There are

many things to which we can likely point as well which look like God is not here. Human sinfulness is real. Our enemy uses it to whisper in our ear that our God does not care for us. Our trust in Him is foolish and we should abandon any hope for his aid.

But Jesus overcame that foe on the darkest day of all, when the sun hid its face and earth the quaked, when nearly every friend fled and Roman soldiers pounded cruel nails into his hands and feet. He knows what that abandoned feeling is like. “My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?” he cried.

But God had not abandoned Jesus to the grave nor did he let his holy one see decay. God’s care and love for him and for you is eternal, patient, and does not fail. Ezekiel’s people would find God’s gracious care in Esther’s brave leadership as queen, in Nehemiah’s efficient governance, in Ezra’s faithful service as priest and prophet. Because God cared for his exiled sheep, they survived, endured, and came to flourish once more. All of those places were unexpected – Esther was a Jewish girl who was unexpectedly raised to the queen of Persia. Nehemiah was cupbearer to the emperor of Persia. Ezra was perhaps the most likely of those who gave pastoral care. But all of them were instruments for God to watch out for the sheep of his fold.

What he has in mind for us, I cannot say, but I can look forward in hope to what he does.