

Sermon Draft

Text: Luke 15:1–10

Sermon: “Not Just A Number”

The two parables which make up our text are just two of the three parables describing God’s longing for the lost which comprise Luke 15. The most detailed and famous is yet to come: the Prodigal Son or the Lost Son or even the Waiting Father (15:11–32). The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin emphasize the joy of finding the lost. But the Lost Son parable ends with the other son, the older son, who is not rejoicing at all. He begrudges his father’s kindness toward the prodigal. That brings the chapter full circle to where it began: with “older sons” (Pharisees and scribes) begrudging Jesus’ goodness to “prodigals” (tax collectors and notorious sinners). All three parables of God’s prodigal love for the lost are meant to confront those self-righteous Jews and melt their hearts to believe and love too.

There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. There’s a band called “Lost And Found.” They’re a couple of Lutheran guys named Michael Bridges and George Baum, and they’re a lot of fun. Their concerts involve lots of banter and jokes with the audience, but also always a clear witness to Christ.

The band is sometimes asked, “Which one of you two is Lost, and which one of you is Found?” And everybody laughs. No answer, really. It doesn’t work that way. It’s not an either/or.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells three magnificent parables about things that are lost: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. The wonderful result is that all three losts get found. Happy endings! Rejoicing in heaven!

But no rejoicing at least that we hear about from Jesus’ primary audience. Jesus told the parables to Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling because Jesus was eating with tax collectors and other notorious sinners. Why didn’t they rejoice when they heard about lost being found? The reason is that they couldn’t see themselves in the stories. They certainly understood that Jesus was talking about the bad folks really bad sinners when he talked about the lost, but they weren’t pleased when Jesus’ parables had happy endings for such sinful people. They wanted them to be punished, shamed from polite society.

What the Pharisees and scribes didn't get was that Jesus' parables were also about them! They were lost! All the evidence you need is that they had no love or compassion for fellow sinners. So, when the shepherd went out looking for the lost sheep, when the woman searched for her missing coin, when the father scanned the horizon, every day hoping to see his prodigal son again, Jesus was reaching out to them! Jesus wanted the scribes and Pharisees to be found. He wanted to have a party in heaven celebrating them. But see, they couldn't be found if they didn't realize that they were also lost. And they refused to admit that.

It's not this one lost, this one found. None of us is either/or. We're all lost every bit as wicked as the tax collectors and notorious sinners, every bit as wicked as the unloving Pharisees and scribes but Jesus died on the cross to find us all.

One of the biggest temptations I think most pastors and congregations face is numbers, numbers, numbers: average worship attendance, number of adult converts, average giving per communicant member.

We're tempted to measure success in terms of numbers. So, we get puffed up and proud when the numbers increase. And we despair when the numbers are decreasing the pews are empty, finances dwindling. We can lose heart. Worry about the future. Go into survival mode.

Numerical growth at all costs. Love of numbers is powerfully intoxicating. Our sinful nature worships at the altar of numerical success. But then we have a new god a form of idolatry we might call "numerolatry."

Of course, numbers can be a good thing. The Book of Acts has a lot of numbers: three thousand, five thousand, "more than ever believers were added." The Book of Numbers has a lot of numbers. In fact, God commanded a census. There were 603,550 men at the beginning of the book, 601,730 men at the end. Numbers showed how the hand of God was blessing his people.

But then, the love of numbers can also be a great temptation. King David ordered a census of his fighting men. We don't know his exact motive, but it couldn't have been good. God didn't tell him to do it. It says Satan "incited" him (1 Chronicles 21:1). And because of it, the Lord sent a plague. Seventy thousand men fell dead. (There are some numbers for all you number-crunchers!)

But that's what's so comforting about our text today. Jesus isn't concerned about filling all the pews. He even leaves the ninety-nine in the open country. He's concerned about a single sheep. He makes an arduous search for one lost sheep. He is filled with supreme joy when one lost sheep is found.

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were muttering, criticizing, grumbling, complaining: ***“This man receives sinners and eats with them”*** (v 2). They kept on saying this aloud, kept on openly voicing their displeasure with Jesus. “This man,” “this fella,” “this guy.” Derogatory. They didn't even want to pronounce the name Jesus. What they said was absolutely true. They said a great truth. But they meant it for evil. It's like when Caiaphas said more than he knew: ***“It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish”*** (John 11:50).

So, in contrast to the Pharisees, Jesus shows God's gracious heart in the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son. His utter delight is to seek and save one lost sinner. God's Word clearly teaches that God so loved the whole world of sinners. In our individualistic society, it's good to emphasize the corporate nature of the Holy Christian Church. But these parables also show us God's love for the individual sinner.

Every single person is important to Jesus. One out of one hundred sheep, one out of ten coins, one out of two sons. One seems insignificant to us. But you are more precious in the sight of God than all the gold on earth. Your soul and body are precious to him. If you had been the only sinner in the world, he would have died for you. God's love for you is radical, absurd to our reason.

To leave ninety-nine sheep alone in the wilderness to seek one makes no sense. It seems irresponsible. Nobody who counts the cost would do such a thing. It's not worth it. We would cut our losses. We'd say, "Well, I still have ninety-nine that haven't wandered off." But our Lord is like an irresponsible shepherd. He's consumed with passion to save the single lost soul. He won't rest until he's found that sheep. That's a great comfort.

So, in this little parable, we see a great loss, an intense search, and finally a joyful finding. What a happy day it was when the lost sheep was found. The shepherd didn't give it a beating. He was compassionate. He didn't even compel the sheep to walk. He carried it on his shoulders. Like Isaiah 40: ***"He will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom [close to his heart], and gently lead those that are with young"*** (v 11).

And then we see how the whole community rejoiced. He calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ***“Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost”*** (v 6). What great joy there is when a sinner repents. What joy God and all the holy angels know when a lost sinner is found. Heaven reverberates with joy over the repentance of one.

“This Man welcomes sinners.” Thanks be to God the Pharisees were right! Jesus is constantly welcoming and eating with sinners. He continues to do this in our midst, feeding us with his own body and blood. Think of that in a little while when you kneel here. He’s got you on his shoulders. He’s carrying you with joy. He just can’t wait for the party. You are that one lost sheep. He has found you. He has worked repentance and faith in you. There is rejoicing over you today, rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God.

So instead of getting all wrapped up in the love of numbers, we are content preaching God’s Word in its truth and purity, as the people of God living holy lives according to it and leaving the results to God. And rejoicing when one sinner repents. To God, one sinner is valuable beyond measure. You are valuable beyond measure. You’re not a number.

In “All Creatures Great and Small,” a series by James Herriot, a vet from Yorkshire, England he was lamenting about the disappearance of the small family farm. He went on a call to a huge dairy operation. Nobody had time for him. They were all rushing around; the milk truck was coming soon. The cows were just “milk production units,” known only by numbers on their ear-tags. In contrast, his next call was to a small farmer. He was hospitable, friendly. He offered a bit of lunch before they went to the barn. And the few animals were all known by name.

So, our Good Shepherd knows each of us by name. We are not just a number. Many other passages convince us of that as well: “*You are of more value than many sparrows.*” (Luke 12:7b) “*Even the hairs of your head are all numbered*” (12:7a). (More numbers for you there!)

With Jesus, you’re not just a number. You’re a precious lamb. He loves you. He died for you. He redeemed you. He searched for you. He found you. He is full of joy over you. May you be convinced of that, for Jesus’ sake.

Amen.