

Sermon on Luke 15:1-10
14th Sunday after Pentecost, September 15, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Have you ever heard the story about the lost engagement ring, lost in Redeemer's kitchen? It happened several years ago, although with over 100 years of history in this kitchen, I can't believe it hasn't happened before! We had held a confirmation dinner at church, and the kitchen had been cleaned up and the dishes all washed. Most people had gone home. But then DeAnne Hilgers discovered that her diamond engagement ring was lost! She had taken it off her finger to wash dishes, and now it was nowhere to be found. Kim and I were still there, so we helped DeAnne search the kitchen. No luck. I remember how frantically DeAnne looked everywhere, sweeping the floors. Kim got down on her hands and knees with a flashlight, searching under the cupboards, stoves and refrigerators. No ring was found. We had all given it up for lost, maybe down the drain? I thought of that old 60s song, *This Diamond Ring Won't Shine for Me Anymore!* The next day, I walked through the kitchen one more time, as the morning sun was shining through the window. I happened to glance at the floor, and out of the corner of my eye, caught a ray of light reflecting off the floor. Could it be?...Yes it was! There was DeAnne's engagement ring, lying near the old freezer (which, ironically, her family had donated!). The lost had been found! I called her immediately, and there was joy in her household! We were even invited to a family party that DeAnne and Chris held a week later, where Elvis himself made an appearance!

So the sermon today is about sin and grace, welcome and joy! It's about being lost, and then found. So it's good news today, in a world and time when we are bombarded by bad news! Today's gospel begins when tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus, and the Pharisees and scribes, all honorable, respected religious leaders, were grumbling and said, "*This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" They were incredulous. How could a respectable teacher of God like Jesus, whom they had welcomed into their homes and synagogues, be so comfortable eating with all those "deplorable" sinners and tax collectors?

They saw them as sinners who had made bad choices, and so didn't deserve to be part of the community, nor welcomed into synagogues. They had become outcasts, and deservedly so. That is why the pharisees and scribes, who had seemingly made "good choices" and followed the rules of church and community, found Jesus' easy camaraderie with tax collectors, sinners and outcasts so hard to understand. They were like criminals who deserved punishment for their crimes.

Jesus saw them differently. Jesus saw them as human beings who had made mistakes, gotten lost in life, and as human beings made by the Creator, who loved them and sought them out to bring them back home. So he flipped the pharisees and scribes attitude on its head, by telling two stories about joy in heaven when lost sinners are found. He told a parable about a shepherd who had a hundred sheep, but one went lost in the wilderness, so he left the ninety-nine to go searching for the one who had been lost. Who wouldn't, Jesus asked? Then he told the parable of a woman who had ten silver coins, but had lost one, so she lit a lamp and swept the house until she found it. And when she did, she had a party!

So the whole story is turned upside down, from human beings jealous about Jesus' attention paid to sinners they considered unworthy, to the joy in heaven for lost human beings being found once more! Why shouldn't we be just as joyful as God and the angels when a lost sinner is found or comes home. It's a joy made famous by the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Lost Son who comes home and is welcomed by his Loving Father, who forgives him and throws a party for him. But still, the elder brother is angry and jealous, doesn't understand his father's joy, so stays out in the field, refusing to come join the party. The Elder Brother's sin was that he didn't believe that his younger brother DESERVED to be forgiven by his father, and be welcomed home. He thought grace was given to cheap, that his father was foolish to welcome him home. There is a lot of the elder brother in this world today, in politics, in the church, and too many times in us. Because grace is not cheap, it's free! But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, it cost Jesus his life! And I think it is the elder brothers of this world that crucified him. It just goes to show you that when we prioritize who is worthy of forgiveness, we miss the whole point of the gospel, we lose the good news of grace, and miss out on all the joy!

We all look hard for things we have lost that are valuable to us. Especially people that we love – like our children or other family loved ones. We all know stories of children who are lost in the woods or in the fields, and the whole town turns out to search until they are found. And when they are found alive, there is great joy. We can relate to this, because we have children whom we love in our lives. But we find it hard to transfer those feelings to children of migrants, who are separated from their parents – and often lost in the detention system for unaccompanied minors. But sometimes we witness the joy of the children and their parents when they are reunited. Can't we have more stories of joy here?

So how about you? Have you ever lost something or someone so valuable to you, that you would never stop searching until you have found them? Have you ever been lost, and needed someone to find you? When have you experienced the loving grace of God, when you needed it most, whether you felt it directly or from another human being, in the name of God, or Jesus?

The Apostle Paul in his letter to Timothy spoke of his experience in this way: *“I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus...for Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the foremost...so I received mercy...making me an example...To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever.”*

In the same way, many years later, John Bunyan, the author of *A Pilgrim’s Progress*, was lost in sin and experienced the mercy of God’s forgiveness. He was a Puritan preacher in England who was imprisoned for 12 years for preaching without a license. He wrote *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, in 1666 while in prison, as a spiritual autobiography. It’s a story of how he was once lost in sin, unable to find his way, but was forgiven by the promise of Jesus Christ, and given a whole new life! The rest of his days proclaiming his joy in being rescued by the mercy of God.

There are many who come to this church who are lost and trying to find their way. Some of them are us, when from time to time we are confused or in despair because of some issue of health, a lost job, or a broken relationship. You may feel forgotten or forsaken, lonely.....but the good news of God’s Word gives you a promise that you are loved. When you are found, God rejoices, and there is joy in heaven, and the angel choirs sing!

There are many who come to this place to find hope because they are lost in their addictions, and know that the only way to have life is to once again find their way. They need the support of a loving community, for others who have already taken this path to support and guide them. They find it here. Likely not in this room, because we seldom see them here in this sanctuary on Sunday morning, kneeling at the altar of God’s Welcome Table. But they come seeking salvation downstairs in the church undercroft, or in one of the rooms in the Learning Center, sitting in circles of compassion with other “lost souls”. Each day of the week, there is joy in heaven when one of those lost human beings is found, rediscovering that they are no longer drug addicts but beloved children of God! They had not heard this message for such a long time, but when they do, they are restored!

There are others who have become lost when they lose their housing, through illness, loss of a job, the sale to a new landlord who won’t renew their lease, or the simple absence of affordable housing – which is a very real problem today in St. Paul. They and their families may become lost in the morass of social services, or in a waiting list that never ends. Being “found” may come when affordable housing comes to them, and then there is great joy in their household!

But the real surprise in the gospel today is that neither the lost sheep or the lost coin repented, nor would they be expected to repent. They just were lost, and the shepherd and the woman searched for them – and they were found! So the shepherd and the woman were like God, searching for lost human beings, searching for us – whether we are looking to be found or not!

So we have a calling, Dear Church, as the baptized, to seek out and welcome the lost. Not just to drag them into worship, but to welcome them - Not to grumble like Pharisees and scribes when the lost show up at our door, and ask why they are here. But that is hard to do, for it is human nature to wonder why it took so long for those sinners to repent, or start looking for a church! As Luther said, “we are all beggars looking for bread”, so our task is to tell others where to find the bread – which is the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord!

But you know this, brothers and sisters. Over the past 25 years we have learned together how to open our doors, our eyes and our hearts to the human beings around us, and not check their “Lutheran credentials”, or whether they have “washed their hands before eating!” The next thing to learn is to welcome not out of duty, but with the “joy of heaven” like Jesus did, and sing with the angels! Even when there might be pushback from others, do dare, like Jesus, to sit with each other, as sinners, at one table of grace, where Jesus is our host!

So I invite you to sing today with the angels, and with all the sinners who have repented over the ages, like John Newton once did, the slave trader who repented and wrote: *Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see!* Hymn #779.