

Trinity 3

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

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

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

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

Our reading from St. Luke is concerned with two parables that are
essentially part of a trilogy that includes the parable of the Lost Sheep,
the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The Parable of the
Lost Son is read separately on the Ninth Sunday after Trinity.

All three of the parables revolve around something lost and then found.

In reading through excerpts of some of the sermons from the early
Church Fathers, prepared for this particular Sunday, it was interesting to
note that it was these particular words from the Parable of the Lost
Sheep on which they focused:

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

Their focus was on joy, specifically the joy of having found the lost sheep and the joyful manner in which it was received back into the fold.

St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote:

But when the shepherd found the lost sheep He did not punish it, He did not bring it back to the flock by driving it before Him, but, placing it on His shoulders, and bearing it with gentleness, He restored it to the flock.

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

With His parable, Jesus turns our focus to God's love for each of His flock, giving us such a contrast to the Jewish view of God's openness to sinners.

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

Putting into perspective the Jewish leadership at the time of our Lord's ministry, we most certainly would see them as taken with their own self-righteousness. Indeed, this self-righteousness was one of the great stumbling blocks to their acknowledging Jesus Christ as the Messiah, as the Son of God.

The Pharisees and the scribes could not conceive of God as ever being receptive to the unrepentant, let alone all the despised and hated sinners, such as the publicans.

We might note that the rabbis of our Lord's day had divided the just or righteous into two classes:

First: The "perfectly just" or "men of works." Those of this class had never committed a sin, not even one sin in all their lives.

And Second: The "penitents." The penitents had once been sinners, but had repented of their wicked ways and were now numbered with the righteous.

The Pharisees, of course, considered themselves as members of the first class, men who had never sinned.

Thus we can more easily see the confrontational circumstances which continually surrounded our Lord's exchanges with the Jews.

It was completely alien to the Jewish leadership that every individual, in spite of himself, is of infinite worth and the object of God's redeeming love.

That God loves all of His Creation equally, saint and sinner alike, and desires their love in return was outside their realm of experience.

That God would even want to seek out the sinner and return him to the flock was a completely alien concept to the Jewish leadership of the time.

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

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

The scene of our Lord as the Good Shepherd and the attentiveness of the angels as they shared in His joy in the rescue of each individual soul has captured the imagination of the Church from its earliest days and that image of Christ has been passed down over the centuries.

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

There was also a story amongst the rabbis that Moses, while tending Jethro's flocks, sought after a lamb which had gone astray. Having found the lamb and seeing it tired and weary, he gently raised it to his shoulders and carried it back to the flock. For this, God was pleased and said to Moses:

Since thou hast shown pity in bringing back a man's beast,
thou shalt be the shepherd of my flock Israel all thy life long.

How perplexing and unfortunate that this story of Moses could not be for the Jews of the time of Jesus an insight into God's very Nature.

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

We must be careful not to look at the parable in allegorical terms thus to avoid perceiving the 90 and 9 as being so righteous they need no repentance; indeed, the parable is not quite so subtle, suggesting that the Pharisees who think they need no repentance, really need it more than the publicans and sinners.

In the second parable from today's Gospel, the theme is continued in the story of the Lost Coin.

While the parable of the Lost Sheep centers upon Christ's tenderness in reclaiming the lost souls, the parable of the Lost Coin turns attention to earnestness, to the extent to which God goes in searching out those lost sinners.

In a display of earnestness, the woman is unrelenting in her search until the lost coin is found, just as Christ is unrelenting and brings back the lost soul to a state of grace. Indeed, a comparison might be made to the Church in that the woman's sweeping her house turns it upside down, as the Church is "turning the world upside down," the charge which has followed the Church to this day.

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

The message provoked a reactionary response from the Pharisees, the Jewish leadership in our Lord's day, because it required a change in their thinking, a radical change.

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

From these two parables, we gain a clearer perception of God's relationship to us through a radical concept introduced by Jesus Christ: "The righteous are not the only ones God loves;" He loves all of us, all of His Creation, and He loves each one individually.

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

Two millennia later, how would we describe our modern society?

Is it similar in attitude to the Pharisees, those clothed in self-righteousness, absorbed in individual importance?

How would we describe the Church today? The clergy? The laity? Are there similarities?

We live in a changing world; God, however, is constant and unchanging; His love for us, his creation, is unchanging. The same today as yesterday.

That love He demonstrated when He gave His only begotten Son to take upon Himself our humanity, to live as one of us, to feel all that we feel. In this way, God came to know His creation in the most intimate way by being one of us in form of Jesus Christ, who in human flesh suffered death upon the Cross for us in the greatest act of love ever.

Our Lord does not want to lose any one of His sheep. Each one of us in His sight is of infinite worth. God loves each of us in spite of all we do **not** to deserve that love. And He actively seeks our redemption; He wants us to come to our senses and repent, to be a part of His fold. He wants our love.

To truly love God requires a radical change in us, just as with the Pharisees.

We must re-examine our values, adjust our priorities, raise our standards, and lower the barriers we tend to place between us and others.

When I say raise our standards, I mean our Standards of Faith, of Worship, of Personal Conduct and Personal Ethics, and our Perception of Individual Worth.

God sees us as creatures of infinite worth and He is Infinite Love. Out of His Love for us, He has given us a set of Rules or Commandments by which to live, and through His Son, He has established His Fold, the Church as a sphere of Grace through which we may attain salvation.

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