**Luke 15:1-10 & 1 Timothy 1:12-17**

We know Luke 15 best for the Parable of the Prodigal Son, one of Jesus’ best known parables. But Jesus also told two other parables in response to the attitudes he encountered from the Pharisees, and we heard those this morning.

Jesus was criticized for the way that he associated with “well known” sinners; tax collectors, prostitutes, and the like. He even ate with them. That was significant in 1st century Hebrew culture because table fellowship showed equality and acceptance. The Pharisees and other religious elites would never do these things. They wouldn’t accept that they were equals to such people. Such people were outside the scope of God’s grace, to their way of thinking. They were irredeemable and God had no concern for such people.

Jesus rebuked them with the parable of the lost sheep.

A shepherd had 100 sheep in his flock and one wandered off. In the summertime in Judea and Galilee, sheep were grazed in the wilderness. There wasn’t enough green vegetation in any one area to keep them fed, so they would be moved around from place to place in wilderness areas, such as Jeshimmon, the region between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. It would be easy for a sheep to wander off from the flock.

But like a good shepherd, God seeks out the lost. No one is without value to God. No is just let go by God. He actively seeks out and tries to restore relationship with those who are living apart from him. One of the great Christian writers of the 20th century, C. S. Lewis, called God the Hound of Heaven for the way that God continued to pursue him, after he had rejected God and become an atheist. The phrase “Hound of Heaven” goes back further than C. S. Lewis, though. It was coined in a poem by a 19th century Catholic writer, Francis Thompson, who also resisted God for years before his conversion to the faith.

As Wesleyan Christians, we have a phrase to describe this: Prevenient grace. Prevenient grace is the grace of God that calls us back into relationship with him before we have faith. I can think of the people, places, and events in my life that drew me back toward God before I put my faith in Christ. I’m sure you can think of the ways that God worked in your life to lead you to Christ. We call those things prevenient grace. It is the Hound of Heaven, the Good Shepherd pursuing us, leading us back to himself.

When the lost sheep is found, the shepherd rejoices and his friends rejoice with him. The implication is that the Pharisees are no friends of God because they do not rejoice in God seeking out lost sinners or in sinners coming home to God.

Jesus is not accepting the sins of the lost, but he is accepting of the lost themselves. As Christians, we are told to judge the fruit of people’s lives. Jesus tells us, “You will know them by their fruit.” And so we should discern between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, good and evil. But we should NOT be in the business of judging people, that is, deciding who is worthy of being a part of God’s Kingdom and who is not. The fact of the matter is that none of us are worthy of being a part of God’s Kingdom. But God is exceedingly gracious and receives all who turn from sin and seek him out. But the Pharisees believed some people could never return to God. Their sins were so bad that there was no way for them to repent. And they were wrong. You can’t sin so greatly that returning to God is impossible. God’s grace is not limited like that.

Jesus continued with the parable of the lost coin. These ten coins are the woman’s KETUBAH, her “dowry.” This is money her father gave her when she married, and it is hers to keep. Her husband can’t spend this money, and if he divorces her, she keeps it. Her KETUBAH is ten denarii, which was not a lot of money, implying she comes from a poor family, as most people did in that time.

But there was another function of the KETUBAH. It was also the “wedding ring” of the day. First century Jewish people did not wear wedding rings. So she would sew these coins into her headdress and wear them as a symbol of her marriage. So they also had a sentimental value.

I was at a church picnic many years ago, and a woman lost her wedding ring as we were playing a game of volleyball. When she realized it, we all started looking around. I found it after just a brief search. She ran over and embraced me, thanking me profusely. I didn’t put any real effort into the search, but it was something meaningful to her.

The woman in Jesus’ parable sweeps the house. The floors of most homes were just rough cut stones, and it was easy for coins or other small objects to fall into the cracks. This is actually one of the ways archaeologists date the ruins of buildings, by finding the coins lost in them, since coins depicted who was the king at the time they were minted. The woman is hoping to hear or see the coin as she sweeps. When she finds it, she rejoices and calls her friends to rejoice with her. In the same way, there is joy among the angels when a sinner repents, Jesus says.

These stories remind us that people get lost in many ways. The prodigal son left in an act of willful rebellion. But the sheep just wandered off. And the coin was lost by someone else. How many people in our world are lost not because of a willful rebellion against God but because they wandered away from him? Or because no led them toward God? How can someone know God if no one is leading them toward him? And as the number of people in our society who know Christ continues to decline, that should be a concern for us. There are many people whose parents never knew God, and maybe their grandparents did not, as well. Who will lead them to Christ?

In 1 Timothy, Paul speaks about his time of wandering away from Christ. I think the context is important to keep in mind. In chapter 1, Paul spends a lot of time talking to Timothy about false teachers and blasphemers. Paul, as we might expect, speaks harshly about blasphemy, but he does not suggest that blasphemers are outside the scope of God’s mercy. In verse 20, he speaks of excommunicating false teachers, saying “they have been turned over to Satan (excommunicated from the Church) so they would learn not to blaspheme.” Even harsh discipline is done with the motivation of pushing a person toward repentance and reconciliation with God.

Paul knows that blasphemers can be redeemed because he was one! Paul was once a lost sheep, a prodigal son. He scoffed at the name of Christ, hunting down and killing Christians. Paul had been led astray from the truth by his Pharisaical upbringing. But God had mercy on him. And he was redeemed and counted worthy of service to the Kingdom. We read the parables of Jesus about the lost, and we read the writings of Paul, one of the most prolific writers of the Bible and one of the most important evangelists of the gospel. But how often do we stop to remember that he was also once a lost sheep and a prodigal son?

“Oh how kind and gracious the Lord is!” His people should be kind and gracious, too. “Christ came to save sinners, and I’m the worst of them.” I think we can all see ourselves as the “worst of sinners.” Because we all know our own sins better than anyone else. We know the things we’ve done that we’ve carefully kept hidden from others. We know our own darkest thoughts. But Christ still came to save us!

Humility and gratitude are the only appropriate responses to such love and grace from God! Each of us is an example of God’s patience. God can and will use anyone for his Kingdom. If God could use a blasphemer and a murderer to spread his message, then he can use me, and he can use you.

This section ends with verse 17, which is a doxology. Doxology means “words of glory.” This is Paul’s response to his reflection on God’s nature and character. Each of us should likewise be motivated to words of praise when we reflect on God’s work of salvation in us. Each of us was once a lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost child. God welcomes us home, and counts us worthy of serving him. Thanks be to God for his grace, his patience, his love, and his kindness!