

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 14
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Jesus goes after _____.

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him.² But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”³ He told them this parable:⁴ “Which one of you, if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that was lost until he finds it?⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders⁶ and goes home. Then he calls together his friends and his neighbors, telling them, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!’⁷ I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.⁸ “Or what woman who has ten silver coins,^[a] if she loses one coin, would not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?⁹ And when she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found the lost coin.’¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

—Luke 15:1-10 EHV

Have you ever lost something so precious to you that you were so troubled until you found it? Years ago, when my family lived in Wisconsin, we had a dog by the name of Shay. Shay was a golden retriever mix. We don't know what she was mixed with, but for the most part she was a golden retriever. Shay loved to chase after things: rabbits, birds, mail delivery trucks, police officers. One day she chased after a police officer. He caught her and put her in the back of his police car. When we tried to get her out, she didn't want to go with us. She wanted to stay. We joked that Shay got arrested.

But the things she loved to chase after the most were rabbits. Usually I could call her back. But not always. There was one time when it was evening in the middle of winter. It was getting dark. And she bolted after a rabbit. To be honest with you, a part of me thought that she was a goner. I didn't think we were going to find her at night in the middle of winter. But we went looking for her. The neighbor came over and helped us. It took a while, but finally my neighbor came through the woods carrying Shay in his arms. She was a mess. She was covered with mud and snow and burrs. She looked awful. But he found her. And he carried her home. Oh, the kids were so happy.

Every time that I study the words before us today, I think of Shay. I think of how foolish my dog was to chase after things and sometimes get lost. I think of the police and my neighbor finding my dog and returning her to me. And I think of the joy on my family's face when she was found.

That's what Jesus does for you. Jesus tells two stories, two parables, today that show us how much he loves you. He wants only one thing for the people of this world. He wants to carry them home with him forever. To use the pictures of his parables, Jesus is not willing to lose 1% of his flock, even though he has many more. He turns his house upside-down looking for one coin, even though there are nine more where that came from.

You see, when Jesus looks at the world, he doesn't see a faceless blob of humanity. No. He sees individuals, and every single one means something to him. To borrow from another Bible passage, **“God doesn't want anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance”** (2 Peter 3:9). That means that if every single person in the world believed in Jesus except one, he would not be content with 99.99% of humanity. He would go after that one.

And that's *part* of the lesson here. Jesus shows his determined love for every single sinner. Jesus has a heart for the lost. But the first two verses of our text are very important. Luke introduces us to two different groups of people. And it's important for us to pay attention to this.

Luke writes, **“All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”** Two groups of people. The first group is made up of tax collectors and sinners. These are the low-lives of society. Picture people whose moral standards and lifestyles are the downfall of society. Everybody knew they were the low-lives of society, but those are the ones who were gathering around Jesus. I picture them sitting with Jesus, hanging on every word from him about sin and forgiveness and the transformed mind of everyone who follows Jesus.

The second group is made up of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. These are the upright ones in society. Picture pillars of virtue, society's last hope against the tax collectors and sinners. These are the pillars of society. And they see Jesus associating with the low-lives. They see Jesus spending time with the problems of society. They

are listening in, and they don't like what they are hearing. And they are muttering. They are complaining. Maybe they have a hand over their mouths, but it's still loud enough for people to hear. **"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."**

That's the context in which Jesus tells these stories. Maybe Jesus looks up from the tax collectors and sinners, and he fixes his eyes on the pillars of society. These parables are intended for their ears. They are disgusted that Jesus is associating with these low-lives. And Jesus is saying through these parables, "Oh, you don't know the half of it. I don't just welcome these people you are scouring at, *I go after them*. These people are my mission. And every time I find one and bring him home to God, there is a joyful party in heaven."

Jesus wants the religious leaders to know how he sees the lost, how God sees the lost. Jesus wants these pillars of virtue to spend some time thinking about why they see those people so differently. And I'll tell you that this is very important for you and me to think through, too. You know, we find these parables right in the middle of Luke's Gospel. In ancient literature the middle of a text was the climax of the text. It was like the center of gravity around which the entire writing revolves.

So, you would think that by recording these parables and giving them such prominence in the book, you would think that God must have realized that people would continue to need these parables throughout the ages. They aren't just for Pharisees and the religious elite. Jesus is giving us a glimpse of his heart so that we have a standard with which to evaluate our own hearts.

And it's good to chew on this. It's good to chew on this when we bemoan the wayward decline of our society. The division between the different viewpoints of morality is only getting bigger. You only have to look at the events of Wednesday and the aftermath of Charlie Kirk's assassination to see it. How did we get to such a point of horror? There are more voices that are screaming against God's voice of right and wrong. People call evil good, and they call good evil. And Christians are right to be concerned.

But how do we respond to this in our world? What is our attitude toward those individuals who are promoting immorality, hostility, and evil? Do we hate them? Do we want to go to war against them and destroy them? Think through this, my friends.

In this parable, Jesus isn't going after the lost to destroy them. And he doesn't say there's a party in heaven every time one of them is damned. No. In the parable, Jesus is going after them to do what? To bring them home. To bring them to God. He loves them so much that he doesn't want them to be in hell.

Not only is it good for us to think about this as we look at the world around us, it's also good to chew on this when we witness Christian brothers and sisters wandering away from Jesus. That's not usually something that happens overnight. There aren't too many times when a Christian makes the decision, "You know, I am going to let go of Jesus so that I can embrace a life of sin." No. Far more often it happens over time. Unlike my dog who just bolted away from me, sheep don't sprint away from Jesus. They wander away.

Every time John and Jane Doe skip church, it makes it a little easier to do it the next time. Absence starts to make their hearts more content. Then they get to the point when they think, "Oh, it's been so long, it would be awkward to go back now." They wander.

Or when Jack and Jill as boyfriend and girlfriend go a little too far with each other, it bothers them at first. But then it bothers him a little less each time. They didn't make a deliberate decision to fall into unbelief. They wandered until they were lost. And what do we think about that? "Good riddance, huh!" No, I don't think so. But maybe we're exhausted. Maybe it feels so hopeless. Maybe we think they aren't going to listen anyway. Or ... or we tell ourselves, "Ah, they'll come back on their own time." But that's not how being lost works. You can't just will your way back home. When you're lost, you need someone to find you and to rescue you.

So, Jesus' parables are begging us to examine our hearts to see how they match up with God's heart. And I think if we were to jot down our findings and compare notes with one another, I doubt that there would be two hearts in here exactly the same, but I do think that there would be quite a bit of overlap.

There would be some thinly disguised contempt for people who don't live up to our highly disguised morality, in other words, self-righteousness. There would be some of us who curl our lips against those low-lives of society and scorn them.

And I imagine that we would find a fair amount of ambivalence for those former Christians or those weak Christians who are well on their way away from Jesus. Maybe it's not so much ambivalence as it is fear. We have fear of confrontation, fear of rejection, fear of coming across as a hypocrite.

But, my dear friends in Christ, take another look at Jesus' heart. When he shows us here his determined love for every single sinner, remember who every single sinner includes. **Jesus goes after sinners.** And who are the sinners? Not just low-life tax collectors. It also includes self-righteous snobs. That's what Jesus is doing here.

Remember who he's talking to. Through these parables, he's seeking these sinners who are in a far worse position than the tax collectors. He's talking to people who are lost, and they don't even realize that they are lost. You, Mr. Pharisee, you're that lost sheep. You, Mr. Teacher of the Law, you're that lost coin. Jesus has a heart for all the low-lives of society, but he doesn't stop there. He wants you to repent too.

You see, the gospel message of the Bible doesn't stop at Jesus dying on the cross to pay for all the sins of the world. It doesn't stop there. It also includes God's desire that the entire world believe it and receive the blessings of it.

He doesn't want anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance. And that desire doesn't ever just sit there waiting for something to happen. No. That desire goes into action as **Jesus goes after sinners.** He's always working. He's always searching.

He found you, didn't he? Maybe you were blessed to be so young that you don't remember – days old at the baptismal font. Maybe you were older, and you could remember that moment as clearly as though it happened yesterday. "I once was lost, but now I'm found." And maybe your favorite thing about these parables is how they illustrate Jesus finding *you*. That you are that sheep draped over his shoulders. You are in the arms of God. He's carrying you and bringing you home.

Could anybody possibly walk away from these parables thinking to themselves that they aren't worth anything to God? Could anybody possibly walk away from these parables thinking that their sin exceeds God's desire to forgive?

If so, I have a recommendation for you. Read them again. And this time insert your name in the blank. Jesus goes after you. Put your name there. Insert your name every time Jesus says, "Lost sheep, or lost coin, or sinner." Because you are the one God's talking about. God's love for you goes way beyond an indifference that says, "Well, I guess I'll take you."

No. God rejoices in the presence of his angels when he found you and brought you home. When you were still lost, God did his cost-benefit analysis and said you were worth it. He knew what he was getting himself into. He didn't do it because there was something virtuous about you, this is just what God does. **Jesus goes after you.**

But let's get more concrete on how he does that. In practical terms, how does God search for people and find them? How did he do it for you? I'm going out on a limb here, but I doubt Jesus came and knocked on your door. I doubt that Jesus invited you to go out for a cup of coffee to talk. I think he sent someone who found you, like a parent or a friend or a neighbor or a teacher or a pastor. And they didn't snub their noses and look down on you. They didn't hide behind fear of rejection or confrontation or anything like that.

But they spoke to you about sin and forgiveness and repentance. They shared God's love for you that goes way beyond your understanding. And that's how he found you. And now who are the people God has put into your life so that he can do the same thing for them through you that he did for you through someone else? Put that name in the blank, and then go after them. Amen.