**Luke 15:1-10** September 11, 2022

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Pentecost 14

 *Luke 15:1 Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. 2But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” 3Then Jesus told them this parable: 4“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ 7I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ 10In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**The Lost
I. People often despise them**

 A few years ago there was a movement that took aim at “The 1%.” The thought behind it was that there is a tiny number of people who control most everything and want to keep it that way. The politics of that viewpoint are not my concern here. I and my family have food on the table and education available. God provides. Though not *all* may be so blessed, the vast majority of Americans are.

 But this 1% idea is a powerful idea. It is nearly as old as humanity itself. Blame a small number of people—maybe 1%, maybe 5, maybe 10; maybe the rich, maybe the poor; maybe the advantaged, maybe the disadvantaged—but blame a small number of people for the problems in society. The thinking goes like this: If it weren’t for this small group of troublesome people, life would be nearly perfect. We would all have prosperity. Love and respect would flow like a river. In fact, without this particular group of nasty people, there wouldn’t even be bad hair days.

 It is always nice to blame our problems on this select group. But that is only half it. They serve another important purpose. Because this small group are the immoral selfish members of society, we can in turn look down our noses at them and admire ourselves in the mirror! Because even when *we* don’t help people who need help, even when *we* only show up in God’s house only once in a while, even when *we* don’t claim all the income on our 1040 tax forms, there are always that 1% who are much, much worse. So who are the villains in your mind—the ones to blame, the ones who make you look good??

 In Jesus’ day the villainous 1% was the “tax collectors and sinners.” ***“The tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear [Jesus]. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them’”*** (1-2). The Pharisees were right. Pharisees could really say that they were better for society than tax collectors and sinners. Pharisees gave generously to God and to charity. They upheld family values in Jewish society. They honored the Word of God, if not in their hearts, at least in the public space. Not so the tax collectors and sinners. The tax collectors were traitors engaged in state-sponsored extortion of the general populace. “Sinners” were the enemy of the family, the rot at the bottom of all the social issues. Whatever else might be said about the Pharisees, they were right about that.

 So as the wicked as the tax collectors and sinners, flocked to hear Jesus in city after city, the Pharisees, the guardians of good, grumbled among themselves. ***“This man [Jesus] welcomes sinners and eats with them.”***

**II. God loves them**

 A few years ago, Chris Driesbach, a guest musician graced our presence. In an after-church concert, he gave a great testimony of God’s grace in his life. He also talked about a prison concert he gave. It was a prison full of men who had done great evil, many of whom will live the rest of their lives in prison. Mr. Driesbach said, “I am glad that they will be locked away for the rest of their lives because they are dangerous men.” Then he added, “And they are people whom Jesus died for. He wants them in heaven.” God’s love for the unlovable is one of God’s great mysteries, in Jesus’ day and ours. As Chris Driesbach admitted, we thank God that he loves sinners, because all of us are.

 So ***“Jesus told them this parable: ‘Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?’”*** (3-4). That search supposes love.

 People’s goodness or badness, their habits or addictions, their personality flaws and neuroses cannot interfere with the fact that they are loved by God. Whatever a wandering sheep is like, however much it is at fault, God still is concerned. This is contrary to the Pharisee in all of us who would judge that some people just aren’t worth saving. And so God’s Word must repeatedly and in many places tell us: God wants every single person to come to a knowledge of and faith in Jesus Christ that they may be saved eternally. Jesus suffered and died and now their sins are paid for, forgiven. That proves that God wants the worst of the worst in heaven. Yes, the inmates with life sentences. Yes, the worst of the serial murderers, terrorists, and dictators. (At this point people object. “You can’t be serious that God wanted Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Jeffrey Dahmer, ISIS militants, and the lot in heaven.” Do you hear the self-righteous Pharisee using your own voice?) And God says, “Yes, even them. May they repent and believe.”

 Oh how different from the Pharisees. They had a saying, and this was not just a saying but part of their official body of teaching called the Mishnah: “There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world.” (Edersheim, *The Life and Time of Jesus the Messiah*, 652.) [Repeat.] How different from Jesus’ love for them all, who testified to the way of salvation before the Sanhedrin, before Pilate, who praying for the crucifying soldiers. He loved them.

 God’s love for every single person is so great that we cannot understand it. Except maybe we catch its whisper in the love of a parent for a child. Yes, a parent will love a child—not necessarily all that the child does—no matter what that child does. Even if that child ends up in prison, vilified by the press, reviled by the world, the parent prays and hopes that that child will come to a knowledge of the truth. They pray that at least their child will come to the point of asking forgiveness. The past cannot be undone, but heaven is the future, and the entry ticket for every single person has been purchased by our Savior Jesus Christ on the cross.

**III. God searches for them**

 The idea that God wants all people to be saved is not merely a theoretical point taught in Bible Class, it stands front and center in Jesus’ second parable. ***“Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?”*** Not only does God tolerate the lost, the “sinners”, not only does he hope they will repent, he actually goes out to searching for them.

 Our duty… and when I use that word “duty” I don’t mean “duty” in the sense of “because I have to.” I mean duty like a uniformed person who takes an oath to serve others even to the ultimate cost of loss of life… Our Christian duty is to take part in God’s search for sinners.

 Take stock of your life, your attitudes. Is one of your joys in life this joy of your heavenly Father? Is your concern that as many as possible may know their Savior, yes, even that 1%? I’m not talking about being friendly, but that you want them to be saved? Think of the people you know. Think of those lost sheep, the lost treasures, that God would have us search out.

 This great truth of God’s search for the lost is so important that it is part of this church’s mission statement. Here it is, on the front of our bulletin, probably so much part of the wallpaper that you don’t see it any more. It starts this way, “It is our mission to seek the unchurched…” Is that part of your personal mission statement? Don’t only think of God as the shepherd searching out the sheep, as the woman sweeping under the bed for the coin. You are the man and woman of these parables. God uses your words, your life, to search out those lost ones. Find your part in this search!

**IV. God rejoices over them**

 Finally, Jesus speaks the most shocking thing of all about the 1%: ***“When [the man] finds [the lost sheep], he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent…” “And when [the woman] finds [the lost coin], she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*** God’s greatest joys are when the 1%, when the almost hopelessly lost, are found. Do we rejoice?

 Many have dogs, but most don’t have guard dogs. What if a cat accidentally got into a fenced in yard with three guard dogs. It won’t be pretty. But now let’s say that the owner of the dogs wants to get a cat. What will happen? If the owner takes that cat in hand, and carefully introduces the cat to the dogs, at first, it is pretty tense. The dogs sniff and growl, the cat spits and hisses. But the master does this day after day. Eventually, over days and weeks, because the master has demonstrated that this cat is a new member of the family, the dogs accept the cat—because the master said so. In fact, they will even protect that cat.

 As we see from the people of Jesus’ day, it is not “natural” to rejoice over those whom we see as the problem. But we learn how to act like Christians by looking at Christ. Christ died for sinners. He searched them out. He rejoiced when they repented. He died, searched out, and rejoices over me!

 Often, we Christians, even though we say that God is for all people, and even though we believe it in our hearts, we don’t always act it out. We can be like that guard dog. We draw lines. We think, “Well, that person won’t fit in very well here.” And like that guard dog, we need our master Jesus to come to us and tell us, “I don’t care what you think about this cat, this cat is dearly loved by me.” You and I understand what Jesus is saying. We conform our minds to our master’s mind.

 ***“Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear [Jesus… and he said,] ‘I tell you that… there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’”*** Yes, God rejoices over that 1%, whoever they might be.

 There was a time, when a child got a rip in his jeans, parents didn’t go out and buy new jeans. Mom didn’t have money to do that. She sewed a patch on them. In those days, when Dad or Mom went out to get soda, they didn’t buy a twenty-four pack or even a twelve pack, but a six pack or maybe a couple individual bottles because that is all the soda money most people had in the soda budget. Back then, even though a candy bar might only cost 10 cents, a kid might come by a candy bar only once or twice a month. Money was scarce. In those days, a certain church had a tradition at its church picnic. At their church picnic they would get a truck load of sawdust, and take about $20 or $30 of change, mostly pennies, nickels and dimes, maybe a couple quarters, and toss it into the sawdust, mix it in with shovels, and then let the kids have at it. What excitement! What joys of discovery! And whether it was a quarter or a dime or nickel or even a penny, when a coin was found, before jumping back in the hunt, the child held that coin in the hand for a moment, and with wonder smiled from ear to ear over a treasure found.

 Can we please, have a little bit of our heavenly Father’s interest in the lost souls bumping up against us day after day? Amen.

*Originally preached by Rev. Peter Martin on September 11, 2016, at Faith, Radcliff, KY*