SERMON | Luke 15:1-32
First Lutheran Church | Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
Aitkin, Minnesota | March 19, 2017

ADULT MESSAGE

Three stories, you heard them, **lost sheep**, **lost coin**, **lost son**. Jesus tells these stories in response to the criticisms he has been receiving for repeatedly **eating** with "**those people**" – "**tax collectors and sinners**." The "**Pharisees and scribes**," faithful, commandment-observing people of God, thought Jesus, if he really is a man of God, should have nothing to do with people they deemed were less than faithful worshipers of God. Jesus should only associate with the "**truly faithful people of God**."

We call this place the house of God. Who should or shouldn't be here in God's house? Just the "**truly faithful**?" What does it mean to be "**truly faithful**?" Today, in this country, the average "**Christian**" attends worship once every month or two. Do you have to attend worship in order to be a "**good Christian**?" What about if your life is a mess? What about if you can't fit worship into your schedule at all? What about if you don't even believe there is a god? Jesus tells these stories about lost things and lost people, **because God deeply loves people** who **aren't very faithful**, or who **aren't even faithful at all**. Or who **don't even believe** there is a god.

This series of parables, told by Jesus, makes ever so clear that **God goes in hot pursuit** of every person who **wanders away from God's loving embrace**. Sometimes God moves quickly, sometimes patiently. Sometimes God pursues us like a sprinter, sometimes like a marathon runner. But, whenever and as long as one of us has **somehow forgotten or run off from God,** God comes after us in **faithful pursuit**. Every day God is working to **draw me close to God**. Every day God is working to **draw you close to God**. No matter how faithful or unfaithful we might be today or any day, God is working to draw us into **total and constant awareness of how much God loves us**. **Of the fact that God is unwilling to give up or let us go**. **Hoping we will love God back**.

You heard Jesus' stories. A **shepherd** discovers that one of his 100 sheep has wandered away from the flock when he is grazing them in the wilderness. Wolves, lions and thieves live in that same wilderness. This crazy shepherd, cares so much for that one lost lamb, that he risks leaving the other 99 alone while he goes in search of the missing one. When he

finds it, he throws a big party to celebrate with his neighbors. And Jesus says, "**There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance**." "**Repent**" means **turn and aim again**. It **doesn't so much mean** "**Quit doing bad stuff**." It means **turn back to God**. It means **come home**.

A **woman** loses one of her ten silver coins and searches diligently until she finds it. Then she throws a party to celebrate the find with her neighbors and probably spends more than the coin is worth. And Jesus says, "**Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents**." "**Repent**" means **turn and aim again**. It means **turn back to God**. It means **come home**. And then there is **joy**!

A **father** loses one of his two sons. The young son asks for his share of the inheritance, an insult to the father. Foolish father gives it to him. The young son immediately takes the money and runs. He runs away from home, family, country and God. Then he uses the money to live a reckless, wasteful life, until he goes broke. A famine hits that foreign land and he has to get a job feeding pigs. Not so bad, except for Jews can't be in contact with pigs. When he left his homeland, he **left God behind**. Now, by feeding unclean pigs, the young son is **throwing up a barrier** that **God is supposedly not able to cross** to come to his aid. He is so poor, and so hungry, that he wishes he could eat the food that he is feeding to the pigs. Then, **in his desperate loneliness and need**, he "**came to himself**." Or we could say, "**He remembered who he was**." He thought, "**How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him**, '**Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands**.'" Have you ever felt **desperate and alone**. All alone.

I think you may know this story. When this young slacker, waster, rude son gets close to home, his father is already **scanning the horizon** for him. His father **sees** him, **runs** to meet him, embraces him, and kisses him. And before the young son can even get his "**repentance speech"** out, the father interrupts him and calls for the servants to prepare a **big banquet** to welcome him, alive again, home again. Friends and neighbors are going to come, see and hear how much the father loves this **embarrassing example of a son**. **Have you** ever had to return home with

your **tail tucked between your legs**? **Have you** ever **received home** a child with their tail tucked between their legs?

I think you may know this story. The **older son** is not happy to have his younger brother home. The younger brother doesn't deserve anything, let alone a welcome home party! The **older son** thinks that **he** has **earned his keep**, **paid his way** to the inheritance. So did the Pharisees and the scribes. The older son said he wouldn't come to the banquet for his wayward brother returned home. The Pharisees and scribes were feeling the same way about the tax collectors and the sinners, and the prostitutes and the drunks, and maybe about the widows and orphans, and maybe the shepherds and the soldiers and the market keepers… And the **foolish father** in Jesus' lost son parable said, "**Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found**." **Have you ever wondered** if you were **good enough** to gather together here around the Table of the Lord? Have you ever **looked down your nose** at someone who showed up here for worship? And do you know that the **Lord rejoiced over both** of you being here?

A **lamb** **wandered off** in search of food. A **coin** simply **got misplaced**. A **son ran away from home** as quickly as he could. **And God went looking for every one of them**. These are **not stories** about **how good or bad we are**. These are **not stories** about **how faithful we are to God**. These are stories about **how much God loves every one of us**, every person ever created. These are stories about **how good God is**, about **how faithful God is**, about **God never, ever, ever, ever giving up on us**. . .

Did the **sheep** never wander off again? Did the **coin** never get lost again? Did the **younger son**, when he remembered who he was, forever stay in a love-trust relationship with his father? Did the **older brother** realize that he also was deeply loved, not because he deserved it but because he was a son too? We don't know. But what we do know is that **each and all of them were worth finding.** And we know that **God is in the finding business**. God has brought a whole bunch of us home to God and family this very day. Being here doesn't save us. Jesus saves us. But this is the place where Jesus moves through Word and sacraments to give us **deep, rich and abundant life every day and forever**. This is the place where God, again and again, welcomes us to home and to family.

I worry about the couples who come before this altar to ask God to bless and keep their marriage and then dance off into their lives as if God has been left behind in this church waiting for their return. I worry about the folks who baptize their little ones, promising to raise them as children of God, and then disappear from our midst. I worry about the kids who promise to follow Jesus when they are confirmed and then don't show up here again until they graduate or come back for their own wedding day. And I worry about their missing parents too.

I worry about them. Meanwhile, **God goes in loving pursuit** of **them** and of **me**.

My wife, Jennifer, and I were walking, almost 40 years ago, with our toddler, Leah. She had only been walking for a while. But she could actually run pretty fast. We were walking across a field outside of the seminary housing where we lived. A busy street was just a few yards away. As we walked along the walkway, Leah would run a few feet out into the field. We would call out, "**Okay, Leah, that's far enough. Come on back to us**." Then she would turn around and head back in our direction. She did this a few times, a fun little game. Then one time, when we called for her to come back, she glanced at us over her shoulder, got a devilish little look in her eyes, turned away and **darted toward the street**.

Our hearts jumped into our throats. "**Leah, stop! Come back**!" We ran in pursuit of her and snatched her up into our arms. We didn't spank her. We hugged her close to us. And told her again how dangerous the street can be. She could be hit by a car and we would lose her. Our hearts were racing at the thought of losing her. We told her we never, ever wanted to lose her.

Jesus spoke about lost coins, sheep and sons. Jesus told about **pulling out all the stops** to bring people home and to keep them safe in God's embrace. Jesus told about **how much joy** there is in the heart of God whenever someone who has wondered off or forgotten about God remembers who they are and comes home. **That's how God feels** about you and me, and about every other person in this world.

Pharisees, scribes, tax collectors, sinners, you and me – **welcome home**! Thanks be to God. Amen.