

Pent 16 2010 [PR19]

Luke 15:1-10 “Jesus and Sinners Like Us”

More than Matthew, Mark and John, Luke lifted up the role of the outcasts, the outsiders and the marginalized in society in the ministry of Jesus.

Theologians have described this ministry, as outreach to the little, the last, the least and the lost. Leading up to chapter 15, our text for today, Luke includes the parables of:

The Good Samaritan,
The Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the Temple,
The Widow and the Unrighteous Judge, and
The Rich Man and Lazarus.

Luke alone tells of Jesus dining with Zacchaeus,
The tax collector,
Healing the 10 lepers and
The visit of Jesus to the home of Mary and Martha and Lazarus.

Jesus was constantly interacting with people on the edges of society. He “ate with sinners and tax collectors”. He healed the lepers who were the outcasts of society. He healed the blind and the lame, blessed little children, honored women, and identified with the poor. Jesus had “a thing” about the little, the last, the least and the lost. That is the case in the text for today from Luke chapter 15. It has 3 parables, the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son (the Prodigal Son).

The lost ones are the subject of today’s text from Chapter 15. Lost sheep, lost coin, lost son. In the case of a lost sheep you could say that the sheep lost itself by wandering off. In some way then you could say that it was the sheep’s fault that it was lost. Sheep are not known for being real smart. The coin is another matter. The coin didn’t “decide” to get lost. It got lost because of the carelessness of its keeper. Most people don’t “decide” to “lose their faith”. Many “get lost” in the world because those responsible for them are careless about bringing them up in the faith. The parable of the Lost Son is another matter. The son chose to lose himself in the debauchery of the world. It led to starvation, misery and shame. But the bottom line in each parable is the FACT of lostness and what Jesus does about it.

Jesus doesn’t judge the severity of the lostness. He doesn’t scold the lost sheep. He doesn’t berate the woman who lost the coin. He doesn’t rebuke the lost son. No, Jesus searches for the lost sheep, finds it and takes it safely

home. The woman who lost the coin searched diligently until she found it, she didn't give up looking until she found her lost coin and then she rejoices in finding it. The Lost Son is welcomed back into the father's house.

The focus of these parables is not on us as the lost ones but on Jesus who seeks and saves the lost. Jesus even goes on to say that there is "joy in heaven" when the lost one is found.

Do we see ourselves in these parables and if so what part do we play? Do we see ourselves as the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son? Often we don't. We like to think of ourselves as part of the 99 sheep who are happy to stay close together and not wander off. We like to think of ourselves as the older brother who stays close to home doing our duty and being responsible. We like to think of ourselves not as sinners but as good people who live good lives, being conscientious citizens, good parents and spouses. We don't think of ourselves as needing to be saved....after all, we are not the lost ones.

William Willimon, in a commentary on this text writes, "Despite our alleged progress and our good intentions, we really do need saving. We can't seem to help ourselves by ourselves. We set out to do good and unintentionally cause great harm. We try to set the world right with our armies and our power only to cause a bigger mess. We make firm declarations and resolutions and then throw it all away on a bottle of booze or a fist full of pills.

Our sin is not just private and personal but also systemic and social. Paul says that the creation is groaning in travail (Rom. 8:22). The Good news is that God did not give us what we deserve." (Pulpit Resource, 9/16/2007)

Jesus "has a thing" about the little, the last, the least and the lost and that describes you and me. The gospel is that Jesus comes searching for you when you are lost. Jesus is the one who rescues you from sin. Jesus is the one who died for you on the cross who redeems you from sin and death. Jesus is the actor in these parables that describe us and our lives. He is the Good Shepherd who searches for the lost sheep. He is the woman who searches for her lost coin. He is the father of the prodigal son.

Getting lost is part of being human. It is part of our human propensity to run from God or to displace God's rule over us with our own self will. This leads us into sin. It's inevitable. You can't avoid it. Even our good intentions are tainted with sin. But our sins and the sins of the world were

laid on Jesus. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. As Luther said, “Jesus stepped forward to become a sinner for us, to even become sin itself, and to act as though he had committed the sins of the entire world from the beginning of its creation (2 Cor. 5:21). Christ’s mission, role, and function was to take away the sins of the world. He carried them all.” (Luther’s Works Vol 22.167).

It is the job of the church to proclaim this good news that Jesus saves the lost. It is our job as Christian parents to pass on this faith in Jesus to our children and grandchildren. It is not just our job, it is our joy and our privilege to be winsome witnesses at home and in our community in word and deed. Jesus is the best thing that has ever happened to the world and to you. He is your best friend, your constant companion, your Savior and your God.

Today is Rally Day and we begin our programs for another year. Why put all this effort into programs at church? Well, it is simply to pass on our faith to our children. It is to encourage one another in faith. It is to give opportunities to hear the good news of Jesus over and over again. We do that in all our programs here at Zion.

And so I say, “Thank you” to all the teachers who have volunteered in our Sunday School and Youth programs. Your witness to our children is vital to their growth in faith. I say “Thank you” to those who will participate in Adult Forums and Bible Studies. You are encouraging others by your participation. I say “Thank you” to those who work on committees, plan events, serving in many ways that encourage and build up this congregation. No one of us can “do it all” by ourselves, the staff cannot do it all by themselves, but with help from everyone we can accomplish a great deal.

Zion is a “School for Faith”. Zion is a place where your faith will grow through worship and study, fellowship and service. Zion is a good church with a good and generous spirit. We are a growing church. The construction will soon be finished (by the end of this month) and things will get back to normal. We have much to do this year. Part of my sabbatical study was focused on options we have for denominational affiliation. We will have speakers and opportunities for members to hear about what positive alternatives we have as we move into the future as a congregation. Early next year we hope to be able to call another pastor. There are changes and challenges ahead for us but we are confident that God will lead us according to his word and will.

What I ask of you as members of Zion is to pray for this church, its staff and all its members. Ask God to bless our work together. Ask for guidance as we make important decisions. Ask for courage to move into the future with faith that trusts in Jesus only for all that we need. And then come to worship every Sunday. Come to give God thanks and praise for what he has done for us in Christ Jesus. Come to learn good theology. Come to hear the gospel preached. Come to receive the sacraments that are food for your faith. Come to hear the good news that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, has found you when you felt little, and last, and least and lost. Come to hear again and again that Jesus has taken you up in His arms and carried you home. Come to be blessed in this place that you might be a blessing to others. This is my hope and my prayer for you as we begin a new year at Zion. AMEN