

Many members. One body united in Christ.

The Third Sunday after Trinity

St. Luke 15:1-10

21 June, Anno Domini 2026

Beloved found of the Good and merciful Shepherd,

The rich and abundant grace of God our Father and His Son Jesus Christ be yours this day.

What man of you if you had fields filled with sheep and discovered that the sickest and weakest one of the flock was missing would leave the rest of the flock unprotected to go find the one that foolishly wandered off on its own? Which one of you, having \$1000, and losing a dime, would turn your house upside down in order to find it? And if you find that little dime would you spend the rest of the thousand throwing a party because you found the dime? The questions sound stupid. Of course, none of us would. The one sheep is worthless and was probably going to die soon anyway. The dime is of such insignificant value that it's hardly worth even going through your couch let alone the entire house. And what fool would then spend everything else celebrating if you did ever find it? Absolutely no one. The shepherd and the woman both are fools, wasting their time and resources looking for things that don't matter, and at the same time risking everything else. No man, no woman of us would be so foolish and wasteful.

The economy would fall apart if people ran their businesses as the shepherd kept His sheep. A simple cost/benefit analysis would have told the shepherd that the one sheep wasn't worth losing the flock. Every day we try to minimize our exposure to risk. We reserve our time and energy for those things that we think have the most value for us. We look for the highest yielding investments. We avoid get-rich-quick schemes. We don't bet on losers. That's how the world works, companies grow, and the strong survive.

That's what is so shocking in these parables. The very nature and context of these parables suggest that this is actually how the kingdom of God works. The Pharisees and scribes had a point. What possible value could tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners have for God? "My God" would never want to sit at table and share a meal with sleazy politicians, lazy workers, gamblers, murders, and child abusers. There are far better and more pious people around. These people, like the lost sheep or the prodigal son, have wasted their opportunity. They are losers and my God wants winners on His team. If you want to be successful, surround yourself with successful people. What could these sinners possibly have to offer God?

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Why would He bother wasting His time on such hopeless pathetic people, let alone sit down and eat with them? After all, why would God want them when He could have someone like me? I have worked harder, sacrificed more, and sinned less. God should want to eat with me.

Repent and learn from the parables that God's kingdom is nothing like your kingdom and the kingdom of men. This world is governed by fairness and rewards. It enriches the strong and worthy and leaves behind the weak. It tosses off unnecessary baggage in order to get ahead. It rewards good people and punishes bad (or at least it's supposed to). It grumbles and complains at those who are inconvenient and don't behave like we, of course, know best. What is so off-putting is that the kingdom of God works nothing like the kingdom of man. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace. It knows nothing of fairness. It is given to the have nots and the failures. It is a kingdom where tax collectors, liars, drunks, addicts, and the self-righteous are given freely everything they don't deserve and couldn't possibly hope to earn - forgiveness, hope, and comfort. It is a kingdom where the weak are sought out and the sleek and strong are left to die of their own foolishness. It is a kingdom where the struggling are surrounded and embraced, not sneered at or chastised. It is a kingdom where sinners like you are relentlessly sought after, though you long ago excluded yourself by your rebellion and disobedience. It is a kingdom where the righteous dies the death of the unrighteous and the unrighteous are freely made righteous. It is a kingdom where the king serves and the servants are made to rule.

Be careful. These parables weren't told so that you could think so much of yourself, as though you were worth so much and that you are so great and special that Jesus just had to have you. One sheep out of a hundred is worthless. One coin out of ten certainly isn't worth much effort. We are the sheep and the coin, to be sure. But we certainly aren't worth the sinless Son of God humiliating Himself to the point of death on a cross. We don't deserve a single morsel of bread let alone the entire kingdom of God. We have done nothing, absolutely nothing to earn or make ourselves worthy of God's mercy and forgiveness.

That is exactly the point and what drives the little Pharisee in all of us crazy. You aren't the reason your heavenly Father sought you out. Your wonderfulness isn't the reason that Almighty God bent His entire will on finding you and saving you. You aren't so special that of course, the Blood of God's Son should pour out of His head, His hands, His feet, and His side to redeem your life from death. No, there isn't a single one of us who could dare claim such worth.

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But that isn't how God works. These parables are testaments to the radical and seemingly foolish mercy of our God. Micah's question is absolutely spot on - who is a God like this, who pardons sins, who doesn't give us just exactly what we deserve? Who is a God like you who passes over transgression and forgives it because Your only-begotten and beloved Son willingly laid down His life as the atoning sacrifice? Who is a God like this, who lays down the life of the worthy for the undeserving. No one. Perhaps for a righteous man some might be willing to die. But for God to actually want the sinners and the unrighteous, for God to desire the broken, the wandering, to burn with such love for them that He is willing to sacrifice the only thing of real worth, His innocent Son, that is completely unimaginable.

And yet that is exactly who God is. He is a recklessly loving God who is not intimidated by your sin. That's not to say He doesn't know that you are full of envy and pride, jealousy and anger. He's well aware of the fact, better than you are. But He desires you. He desires your eternal life. His love for sinners is completely one-sided. He gives and we receive. He dies and we live. He becomes poor so that we might be rich. He demonstrated His love for us in this, that "while we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly...God showed His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

There is no question that such love is radical, unheard of, even senseless. It is as striking and unnatural to us as it was to the Pharisees. But apart from that kind of love tax collectors, prostitutes, liars, slanderers, gossips, perverts, cheats, and grumblers like us could hope for nothing more than eternal damnation. In the dark hours, when the self-righteous Pharisee inside is exposed as a fraud and you are reminded that you are anything but righteous, when you despair that God could ever want anything to do with someone who says and thinks and does the things you do, when you find yourself alone in the midst of your sorrow and our pain, the Good Shepherd stands before you and says "I have found you. You are mine. I have gladly suffered and laid down my life for you. You are precious to me. Take, eat and drink my Body and Blood that were poured out for you, to cleanse you, to purify you. I love you because of who I am, not because of who you are. I want you in my kingdom in my fold where I can feed you and care for you. I want you to feast on my forgiveness. I want you to stop looking at yourself and trying to find something that would make you worthy, something that should make me want you. You'll never find it. I love you. I have come to wash away the filth and stain of your sin and to sit you down at my table and serve you with the richest food and the finest wine. I didn't hang on Calvary's tree for righteous people. I didn't endure death and hell for good people. I suffered, died, and was buried for sinners,

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like you. I rose again and ascended to the right hand of God for sinners like you."

Are you a poor, miserable sinner in whom there is no good thing? Do you despair of your righteousness and worthiness? Do you think that there is no way God could ever want someone like you? Perfect. Behold Jesus who gladly receives sinners and eats with you in the kingdom of God.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.