

“Parables of Grace”

Luke 15:1-10

When Luke introduces the parable of the lost sheep, he records that tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him, and that the Pharisees and scribes (the winners) grumbled extensively about such consorting with losers. “This man welcomes sinners”, they grumble, “and even eats with them”. And Luke completes his introduction in verse 3 by saying, “So Jesus told them a parable”.

In other words, the parable is presented as yet another instance of Jesus’ rubbing the salt of lostness on the sensibilities of those of us who are preoccupied with the sweetness of our own success. If our drug company is successful, who cares about who is being hurt? If our pantries are full, who cares about what’s happening to our children across the street at Parma Park or up Pearl Rd. at the Redeemer Crisis Center or in the Bahama Islands? Divinity cares.

As far as the parable itself is concerned, Matthew and Luke give only slightly different versions. Jesus begins by proposing to his audience, the Pharisees and scribes, a hypothetical case. Suppose, he suggests to them, a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost. Jesus then asks, expecting of course an affirmative answer, “Won’t the man leave the 99 in the wilderness and go seek the lost?”

Time for a pause. While it may or may not be true that shepherds in Jesus’ day had that kind of devotion to individual members of their flocks, this parable can hardly be interpreted as a helpful hint for running a successful sheep ranching business. The most likely result of going off in pursuit of one lost sheep will only be 99 more lost sheep.

Jesus is implying, it seems to me, that even if all 100 sheep should be lost, it would not be a problem for this bizarrely Good Shepherd because he is first and foremost in the business of finding the lost. Give him a world with 100 out of every 100 souls lost – give him, in other words, the world full of sinners that is the only real world we have – and it will do just fine: lostness is exactly his cup of tea.

No matter what we do with lostness, though, the rest of the parable is about one thing and one thing only: joy (chara in Greek), which is the root and blossom of the shepherd's will to find. Jesus paints a vivid picture of joy, complete with the man putting the sheep on his shoulders, coming back to his house, calling together his friends and neighbors, and saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep".

It is the very end of the parable, however, that Jesus makes his point most strongly. Pushing his comparison all the way to heaven itself he says, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance".

Then Jesus tells the parable of the lost coin. Jesus begins in the same hypothetical way ("What woman, if she had 10 silver coins . . .") and he continues with the same suggestion that she will drop everything and hunt energetically for the lost property. When she finds it, Jesus says, she too calls friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin I lost". Finally, Jesus concludes the parable with the same observation as before: "Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents".

Consider this. A lost sheep is for all practical purposes a dead sheep. A lost coin is likewise a dead asset. Looking ahead to the parables of the unforgiving servant and the prodigal son, a person in debt about to be foreclosed on is a dead duck and a son who has blown his inheritance is a deadbeat. All these parables of lostness are emphatically not stories designed to convince us that if we will wind ourselves up or climb up the ladder to some better level of moral or spiritual improvement, God will then forgive us. No!

In all of these parables, it is precisely the lost (and thus the dead) who come to the party. More than that, in none of these parables is anything except the will of God portrayed as necessary to the new life in joy. The sheep, the coin, the debtor, the son do nothing to earn the new life in joy. These stories, therefore, are parables of grace and grace only. There is in them not one single note of earning or merit, not one breath about rewarding the rewardable. There is only the gracious, saving determination of the shepherd, the woman, the king, and the father – all surrogates for God – to raise the dead.

I would not have accepted this calling to be a pastor 34 years ago if I did not believe that God could use me and the congregations I serve as his surrogates in sharing his grace and forgiveness with everyone. With everyone without exception!

In 1994, 25 years ago, I encouraged our congregation to adopt a new formed catholic sister parish just outside of McAllen, Texas. The Sister Parish movement was just beginning. The goal was to partner mostly protestant congregations in the U.S. with small and poor congregations in

Texas, Mexico, and Central America. We were in search of lost sheep and where better to look than in Texas.

In the 1990's it was mostly Mexicans crossing the border and seeking asylum. Although in 1992, before leaving Fargo, N.D., we took in a Honduran 17 year old refugee for over a year.

The Mexicans we connected with were buying lots on land contract in a huge field outside of McAllen. They were building corrugated steel shacks with outhouses and a water hose for showers. On our visit in 1994, I stayed with a family in those conditions, as I had done before in Central America. When I returned in 1999, I graduated to staying with a family in a trailer.

On the 1999 trip, we had just renovated our chapel, and so we took with us our old altar, lectern, and many small, wooden Sunday School chairs. By now most of the Colonia, as they are called on the border, owned their lots and were beginning the many year process of building houses on their lots. The houses are built in stages as they have the money. They had also built a two room block church for us to put our furnishings in.

At the worship service we dedicated the furnishings and Father Albert, a missionary priest from Zaire, invited me to distribute Holy Communion beside him. Albert and I agreed that we are all called to share God's grace.

Over the past 20 years, our youth director, Joni, continued the sister parish relationship by taking 9 different groups of high school youth to the Colonia to stay in people's homes and to do work projects. Their last project was clearing brush from the field where they were to build a new church. Joni texted me last May to let me know, they'd invited me to return for the dedication of

their new church building on July 14th. We were able to piggyback it on a planned trip to Iowa to visit Danette's mom and two siblings.

I drove from Iowa to Nebraska, left our van, and picked up 6 St. John women ages 16 to 75, switched to the church van and headed to the border. We arrived early afternoon on Sunday, settled in to our host's homes and went to the 5:00 dedication service.

- 1) When we pulled up to the new church, my eyes welled up in tears.
- 2) Over 500 of us gathered for the processional.
- 3) Acolytes were plentiful as we sat to the side of the altar
- 4) The altar we donated was in the crying room to the side of the altar.
- 5) Father Albert had also returned with the Bishop of the Brownsville Diocese in the background.
- 6) Following the 3 hour dedication service we went outside for a feast.
- 7) We were entertained by a Mariachi Band and dancers.
- 8) On Monday morning we joined up with 3 members of Our Savior's Lutheran in McAllen to deliver restaurant donated meals to the homeless, an every Monday ritual. They knew where the homeless hung out.
- 9) Our next stop was at the respite center where refugee families were gathered who had been granted asylum. We brought 50 bags with a stuffed animal, crayons, and coloring book. It was not enough.
- 10) We quickly handed out the bags while children who didn't get one began to cry. The Nebraska women began to cry. Joni took them back out while I stayed to visit a local

T.V. reporter and his camera man. He explained why we're not allowed anywhere near the detention centers.

- 11) People waited in line to get help with airline tickets or bus tickets
- 12) From there we drove to the border, parked our van, and walked over the bridge, over the Rio Grande, to Progreso, Mexico.
- 13) I had never seen people actually camped on the bridge waiting to get across and apply for asylum.
- 14) Eating in Mexico with Ginger, whose home I was staying in.
- 15) The unbelievable house of a young couple and their 3 children. The parents came over as young teenagers in the 90's, living in a trailer on this lot while building this home over the past six years. The trailer is gone.
- 16) He is a crew chief on an oil rig getting paid for 24 hour days for 14 days at \$35 an hour – then 14 days off to work on his house. They hosted our cookout the night before we left. Our oldest traveler, Shirleen, 75, was blessed to stay at their house on her first trip to the border.
- 17) The founding father of the Colonia and church in 1994. His wife passed away a year ago. His daughter has become the matriarch of the community.
- 18) The two women who hosted me in 1999 and 2019.
- 19) Traveling with 6 women means stopping at the Magnolia tourist trap in Waco, Texas to help enrich Chip and Joanna.

In the parable of grace there is only the gracious, saving determination of the shepherd finding the lost sheep and the woman finding the lost coin.

As surrogates of God may we be a place of hope, healing, and welcome for everyone, the mission statement of Divinity Lutheran Church.

May the peace of God . . .

#326 – Bless Now, O God, the Journey