

Trinity 3

June, 20, 2021

Luke 15:1-10

One of the foundational skills a soldier must learn early in their military career is land navigation. Technology is terrific, but if you can't find your way with a compass and a map, you may be in big trouble when the batteries die or GPS goes dark.

Almost every school I've attended for my military career has included a land navigation course. It would always pain me to see a fellow student just one degree off the mark and end up failing to find their way to the target destination. You see, being just one degree off with your compass is all it takes to lead you astray and off course. The 1 in 60 rule says that for every degree you are off course you will miss your target or destination by a mile to the east or west for every 60 miles traveled. That's not good and reveals how quickly one can be lost.

Sin affects us in similar ways. To sin is to miss the mark. It's to miss the target or destination in which you are to go. It is to miss and not act according to the commandments or live according to God's will. And when one misses the mark or sins, they begin to depart and journey away from their Father in heaven. It may be perceived as a tiny sin, or it may be the complete denial of transgression or wrongdoing on one's part. Still, when this occurs, the Christian begins wandering away from the Church, becoming lost, much as a soldier or sheep in the wilderness of life.

Today, the Gospel begins by saying the *"tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]."* This is building upon the close of the preceding chapter when Jesus says, *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."* So, who is it that comes to hear Jesus? It is as you heard in last week's Gospel, *"the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind."* (14:21). So, it's you and all those people who suffer from the original sin of Adam and Eve. And yet, the Pharisees and the scribes were recorded as grumbling that *"this Man"* would receive these sinners.

Hearing the grumbling, Jesus turns and provides the Pharisees and Scribes with the parable of the lost sheep.

Hear how He speaks to the Pharisees and Scribes, *"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?"* (v.14)

In our world and in the Church, we may be tempted to look at the problem mathematically and say, they only lost one of one hundred sheep - not too bad, that's a 99% success rate. But the shepherd in the parable departs anyway - in search of the one sheep, going against our instincts and measures for success to bring the lost one home.

One must be careful to also note throughout the dialogue, Jesus is speaking directly to the Scribes and Pharisees, He is saying to them - *"It is you who have lost the sheep."* And now He is calling on them to hear His words and imitate His love toward sinners - those who have wandered away from the God of Israel.

This coming week (Friday, June 25th), the Lutheran Church observes the Presentation of the Augsburg Confession. In a nutshell, the Augsburg Confession is the principle and a foundational document of the Lutheran Church. Within the articles presented some four hundred and ninety-one years ago were articles Four on justification and Five on the office of Holy Ministry. Justification is the truth and teaching that our forgiveness stands upon the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus and nothing else. The ministry or the preaching office stands upon the command of Christ Jesus Himself to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments as Christ has instituted them for His Church on earth.

An interesting nuance in the layout of the articles of the Augsburg Confession is that they always begin with, *"Our churches teach that..."*, except in one place, here between articles four and five. Article five starts by saying, *"So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted."* Why the change? Because of the establishment of the office of Holy Ministry, the office of shepherding God's flock was established to administer the justification (the forgiveness) to God's people. The two articles go together.

What does any of this have to do with the Gospel today? The Pharisees were more concerned with their own wellbeing than for their neighbors or the people they were leading. They were not journeying, seeking, rescuing, or restoring the lost sheep of Israel. Instead, they were grumbling that Jesus would accept sinners.

But Jesus does accept sinners, *"the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind."* - You and me. And for our justification – the forgiveness of sins - He did die upon the cross and now sends His under-shepherds (the pastors) to care for you by administering the sacraments and preaching to you His Word of law that should bring one to repentance, but then, announces the joyful news of absolution to you.

Over the past few years, as I raise my children, I often reflect on the reality of how I teach them to confess their sins and receive forgiveness immediately. Parents don't permit time to pass over a child's transgression; instead, repentance and forgiveness are decisive and immediate. This pattern we instill in children is good, and it follows the Proverb, *"Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old, he will not depart from it."* (22:6)

Regrettably, as we grow older, we become consumed with the politics of our vocations and miss the mark by our transgression between neighbors and before God. As a result, we seldom practice the immediacy of repentance and absolution we have so dearly shepherded into children or had planted into our ears and hearts when we were children.

Instead, as we come to the knowledge of our words that slander and kill or our desires to scheme and manipulate behind the backs of neighbors or co-workers, we would do well to confess and repent immediately. But, unfortunately, the longer it takes to confess, the heart grows evermore callous, and the Christian drifts and wanders ever further from the flock of God's true Church.

We all know that it doesn't take much to miss the mark; the slightest miscalculation will lead you miles away from your destination (anyone living and driving in Washington, D.C. can attest to missing a turn-off and finding their way 20-30 minutes out of the way). But, for the Christian, for you, missing the mark separates you from Christ Jesus and His Church – the flock you were all Baptized into with the same water and the same Word.

Being an under-shepherd of Christ Jesus is a challenge, and it is a joy. Because as a pastor, it means going into the uncomfortable wilderness of this life and world to call you the straying and lost sheep home.

But, do you know what brings me comfort? It's not my Word that seeks you, but the Words of Christ Jesus, our Great Shepherd.

It is His death and life that unites us. It is His Word that calls us. It is Him who restores and justifies you. All this is cause for rejoicing – because your heavenly Father sent His only begotten Son into this world and wilderness to restore you and bring you with your brothers and sisters in Christ into the eternal joy of heaven.

So, let us put off the Old Adam and repent before God the Father. Let us look to our brothers and sisters in Christ as members of the same body, reconciling with one another in haste. And then let us rejoice with one another and with heaven over the Good News we have heard – Words spoken by the pastor to justify and ensure you are brought safely into the eternal presence of your heavenly Father by His Son, Jesus Christ. +INJ+

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