

People of God, in our Gospel lesson today we heard three Lost and Found stories. In the first a Shepherd loses a sheep, makes diligent search for it, finds it, and throws a big party in celebration. In the second a woman lost an expensive coin, makes diligent search for it, finds it, and also calls together her friends to have a party and to celebrate its recovery. The Third story is a story of a Father who lost a son. He chose to leave his father's house and spend his inheritance on reckless living. But eventually, when he comes to his senses and sees the error and foolishness of his ways, he comes home to a loving Father who rejoices that his son who was once lost has now been found, and he too throws a big feast in celebration of his return.

Jesus tells these stories because he is defending his choice of dinner companions to the Pharisees. The Pharisees categorized certain people as sinners, and as unclean. And Jesus is having celebratory dinner parties with these unclean sinners because they once were lost but now have been found. The Pharisees refused to eat with such people. They wanted to remain pure and unstained from "sinners" and so they only ate with those who were pure like them. They don't associate with the tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners, with those who are not clean; with those who are on the low end of the scale of social respectability. But Jesus does. Because Jesus is on a mission to seek and to save the lost. And so these meals serve both as a context to draw people back to God, to seek and to save the lost, and to simultaneously rejoice in their coming back to God.

Now these passages have usually been applied to the church by encouraging them to be involved in evangelism and missions. But they just as easily apply to those who are within the church and who are going astray, it applies to those who have been excommunicated, it applies to those who, for whatever reasons, have found themselves estranged from God and his

people. Jesus desires to bring back lost sheep, and he knew that one of the most effective ways to restore those who are lost is to invite them to a meal. This is why Jesus' ministry is essentially one big traveling dinner party. It is a never-ending celebration and party rejoicing that those who were lost are drawing near to Jesus, and being saved.

The Pharisees created man-made taboos which were designed to keep Israel "clean." But all they actually did was keep people away from God. Jesus purposely broke the Pharisaical man-made taboos that kept lost sinners from being found and brought near to God. Jesus is concerned to fill the banquet hall of Heaven, and to keep the party going, not to make sure that the hall remains clean but empty.

The chapter begins by saying, *"Now tax collectors and sinners were drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the Scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"*

Tax collectors and sinners were drawing near. But the Scribes and Pharisees were grumbling. Drawing near is worship language. Grumbling is what the Israelites did in the wilderness, which led to God destroying them. Just like in the wilderness, God is feeding his people, but there are those who never satisfied with the grace of God and grumbled. But these sinners were satisfied with God's grace. Like in Hebrews 4:16, these sinners were drawing near to Jesus, drawing near to the throne of grace, that they might find mercy and grace to help in a time of need. And the joy of it all is, that Jesus is always ready to receive penitent sinners who draw near to him, as long as they draw near to him in humble repentance.

"There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance." Jesus is not suggesting that there are actually 99 persons who do not need to repent. He already established in Luke 13

that unless you all repent, you will all likewise perish. Rather, Jesus' words are aimed at the self-righteous Pharisees who thought they didn't need to repent. But God is not rejoicing over you and your proud self-righteous attitude. God and Heaven rejoice over lost sinners who truly repent and turn to him.

This is seen most clearly in the third parable, what we know as the Prodigal Son. He was truly repentant. He came to understand his condition, that he had run away from His Father and his house, that he had squandered his property in reckless living, and after a severe famine had arisen, perhaps even a famine within his soul, He was starving. He was eating with the pigs for a while. But eventually he came to his senses. He realized what he had done, he realized that his soul was starving, and he was living in a land of famine, and he knew he had to go back to his father. So he does.

And the Father, seeing his son a long way off making his way back to him, was filled with compassion and love for his son, ran to him and hugged him and kissed him.

In true humility the son came to his father confessing his sins, saying, *"I have sinned against Heaven and against You. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."* And the Father's response was to rejoice and celebrate the fact that his son who once was dead is now alive, and who once was lost is now found.

The very first act that a person must do to draw near to God is to confess their sins. And it is this one thing that is most necessary, which proves to be the most difficult. But the word of God says,

"Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep, let

your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”

This is why one of the very first things we do in our worship service, when we draw near to Jesus to eat and drink with him at his table, is confess our sins. We acknowledge that we are sinners, that we are lost and need to be found. That we were dead but need to be made alive. That we have sinned against heaven and against our God and Father, and are no longer worthy to be called sons and daughters of God. And when we do that, Jesus receives us. And the Heavens rejoice. The biggest barrier for sinners coming back to Jesus is their own pride and self-righteousness.

And if we are filled with pride and self-righteousness, and do not think that we are sinners, and we try to draw near to God with false hearts filled with arrogance, and self-justification, we do not come away justified, and we never actually draw nearer to God. We come away condemned. As the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector shows to us.

A Pharisee approached God and thanked him that he was not like this wicked tax collector. But the tax collector, knowing himself to be a sinner, didn't even lift up his eyes to heaven, but simply said, Lord, have mercy on me a sinner. And Jesus said that the one who went home right with God was the penitent tax collector. “For the lost find in Jesus a Savior; but the proud and self-righteous find in him a judge.”

Let us now consider the significance of Jesus' continual use of the word “lost” in each of these stories. The Pharisees saw these people categorically as “sinners.” And this creates a division in the mind of the Pharisee between him and the sinner. He is superior to the sinner. He is righteous, the sinner is not. The Pharisee is pure, the sinner is unclean. But it is precisely this

attitude which keeps the Pharisees dinner tables clean but empty. But when we acknowledge that we are sinners, that before God we are unclean, he makes us clean and brings us to His table. And there we rejoice with God.

Now, in the Belgic Confession, article 28, which I read when we have new members join the church, it says this:

And to preserve this unity more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to God's word, to separate themselves from those who do not belong to the Church, in order to join it.

Now, before we say what this separation means, let us clarify first of all what this does not mean. It does not mean that we adopt the attitude of the Pharisees whose desire to remain pure and unstained from the world prevented them from seeking to save the lost at all. It cannot mean that.

So, what it does mean is that we are to separate ourselves from being influenced and led astray by the lost. Like Ps. 1 – *The blessed man does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers.* But we should be willing to position ourselves in such a way that the wicked learn to walk in the counsel of the blessed, sinners stand in the way of the righteous, and the scoffers begin to sit in the seats of worshipers. To be separate from those who are not in the church does not mean that we never talk to or associate with any unbeliever or lost person ever.

Rather, we must learn how to bring the lost to Jesus, or bring Jesus to the lost, and not allow the lost to lure us away from Jesus. That is the point. We must not be like the real sinners, those whose wicked hearts are revealed in a Jewish Commentary on Ex. 18:1 – “Let not a man associate with the wicked, not even to bring him to the law.” That’s the attitude of the Pharisees. That’s the attitude of the self-righteous. We must not be so

cold and removed from the plight of the lost that we wouldn't even dare bring them to the law of God and to salvation. That is insane.

The law was laid down for sinners, to teach them, and guide them in the ways of God, and to teach those who were in a position to help how to provide for the lost – for those who were burdened with all sorts of trials and afflictions and troubles, but who sought their help from God. God's people had been redeemed from their bondage to sin, and have now come into the freedom and joy of the sons of God. And the Church now is to seek after and provide relief for those who are in the midst of any affliction – spiritual, physical, mental, communal, material, that they would experience the joy of salvation which makes them free to serve God and their neighbor.

That is one of the main reasons the Church of Jesus Christ exists. We are not a country club. We are not a place where the spiritual elite come. The Church is the only institution in the world who exists for the sake of its non-members. And the Church exists not so the love of God can be kept pure among the 99 righteous who need no forgiveness. The Church exists to bring the love of God to the one who runs away, and who squanders themselves in reckless living, to the one who through their stubborn pride and rebellion brings shame to him and his family. The Church exists to help bring people back to their senses and to help them repent and that they might be found again, and be saved.

We ought to be very careful with how we categorize those people who are not yet in the church. We should not consider them as sinners, categorically, but rather simply as those who are lost. Because when we refer to them as lost, we hear the Father's compassion in the word, compelling us to be like Jesus and to also have compassion on them, and to go and seek the lost that they might be saved.

Let us also consider the significance of the number of the coins and the sheep. There were 10 coins, there were 100 sheep. But when one is lost, 10 becomes 9, and 100 becomes 99. Obviously. But these are symbolic numbers, representing the whole of God's people. When even one is missing, the whole is not complete. But Christ is determined to bring in all the lost people of God to himself. And when we think of the task in terms of one missing, the urgency for completing the task of finding the one grows more and more. It becomes an accomplishable task. The urgency and the expectancy increases with in us when there is one left.

But if we think that there are billions of lost that are still to be found, the urgency of bringing in an incalculable number of people could make us complacent and negligent in our duty to seek the save the lost sheep, since we think it is an impossible task. But if we set in our minds the idea that even one of the lost that may be found is the last one which will make up the whole number of God's people, then the urgency and motivation to do the work of evangelism and missions and readmission is restored. There is just one more to be found. Only one.

Like in the movie Hacksaw Ridge, when Army medic Desmond Doss kept going back out onto the battle field to find just one more wounded soldier to save. To motivate himself he said, "Just one more, Lord. Just one more." And when he was done he ended up saving at least 75 men.

Now the fact that there is a search for the one lost sheep or coin indicates that it is of great value. A shepherd's sheep is lost. It is of great value to him, such that he will go and search for it in the open country until he finds it. The woman's coin also has value, such that she will tear apart her house until she finds it, because it has value to her. A man's son is lost, and he will look for his son and run to hug and kiss him when he comes home.

Well, here is a case of a “how much more” argument. If a sheep has value, if a coin has value, then how much more value have these people who are created in the image of God and who have run away from him and are lost in their sin? How much more value does a human person have than a sheep or a coin? Much more value, of course.

Now if people would celebrate the fact their lost sheep and coin were found, and if it makes sense for a father to throw a party in celebration of his lost son who was found and has returned home, why in the world would we not celebrate that lost sinners were found and were returned back to God?

Indeed, the entire value and worth of God’s people as a whole is not found only in the whole, but it is found in each and every single individual for whom Christ died. For Christ paid an infinite value for each and every single individual to be saved. So let us not think that the value of the one that is lost is not all that costly, and that we can make do without them. For Christ, with the infinite cost of his own perfect and sinless shed blood, ransomed for God people from every tribe and language and people and nation.

And since God considers the value of even one sinner who repents to be worth the treasure of the lifeblood of the Son of God, let us not treat the blood of the Son of God lightly and spurn his sacrifice by not searching for the lost for whom Christ died to save. That is what he commissioned us to do. Go and preach the Gospel to the whole Creation, that the earth would be filled with the glory of YHWH. To go and make disciples of all nations. That is why the Church exists. To follow in the mission of seeking and saving the Lost whom Jesus Christ purchased with his own blood, is the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ.

There is an amazing story from the early 1700's in Germany of two Moravian Missionaries, John Leonard Dober, and David Nitschman. These men were young, in the 20's. During a Church service they heard of an island in the West Indies, which are where we would call the Caribbean, where there was an atheist British man who had over 3,000 slaves. These slaves were taken from Africa and brought to the West Indies to work on sugar plantations. These Africans would never live a day of their life ever hearing about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And they would die in their slavery and in their sins.

These Young Moravian men were deeply moved by this sad reality, and they decided to go to the West Indies to bring the gospel to these slaves. But the only way they could do that was if they sold themselves into slavery to the atheist slave master. So that is what they determined to do. They chose to leave their families to go and bring the Gospel to lost slaves, whose souls were of infinite value to Jesus. They were ready and willing to give up their lives in order to suffer and die as slaves so that they could share the gospel with lost sinners. Well, the time came, and they began to set sail to go on their mission, with the expectation that they would never be seen or heard from again. And as the ship departed from the port, one of the men held up his hand and proclaimed to his family and friends who had watched them sail away, "May the Lamb who was slain receive the reward of his suffering." And with that, the Moravian Missions Movement began.

People of God, Christ will find his lost sheep. Christ he will bring home his lost sons. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the Lost. Let us go forth from here and invite the lost to eat at our own tables, that we might share the message of Jesus Christ our Savior, who died to forgive them of their sins and to bring them home to their loving heavenly Father.

Let us go forth from here with a concern and love for those who are lost, to bring them to Jesus, that they would be saved.

This is why the church exists, and this is the fundamental mission of Christ the Redeemer Church. We must learn Tabletop evangelism if we are going to accomplish our mission. Pella will never be re-Christianized if we are not searching for the lost. And the best place to look for that one lost sheep, and to have them find Jesus and be found, is to invite them over for a meal, and have intentional talk with them about the Lord Jesus Christ who died to save them.

People of God, While we are to separate ourselves from the influence of the lost, God does not want believers to isolate themselves from the world to such a degree that they never relate to the lost. Jesus was constantly out among people, especially people who did not know God. Though some grumbled that he had the wrong associations, Jesus knew why he was building such relationships. He knew that something might develop to influence a person who did not know God to consider him more seriously. People like Matthew or Zacchaeus were discovered this way. Because they were invited to a dinner party.

Inviting people out to dinner or Breakfast or Lunches at work provide another opportunity. Over a period of weeks, months, or even years, we can build relationships with people where we communicate in a caring way that we are praying for fellow employees. There are numerous possibilities for evangelistic contact, once we commit ourselves to look for the opportunities. Jesus calls us to be on the lookout for the lost, just as he was, and to be prepared to take the initiative in helping them find their way home to God. The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost. Will you follow him in his mission? Amen.

Darrell L. Bock, [*Luke*](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 408–409.