

Jesus seeks us out

In today's Gospel, we hear Jesus speaking two parables: the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin. It is to the parable of the lost sheep that we want to focus on in the following:

The previous section of Luke's gospel had the cost of being a disciple as its subject. It concluded with Jesus' admonition: "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear,*" (Luke 14:35b). Chapter 15 tells us who did gather to hear: tax collectors and sinners. But not only did they listen to Jesus - they were even welcomed to eat with Him!

The word "sinner" may refer to people who were especially immoral and wicked; it may, however, refer simply to people who were not strict about fulfilling all the varied requirements of the ceremonial law. They were "sinners" in the eyes of the Pharisees because of their neglectful attitude toward religion. Tax collectors are one striking example of such sinners.

The question of eating with tax collectors and sinners was raised previously (Luke 5:30) after Jesus had called Levi to become one of His followers. The Pharisees and teachers of the law again mutter about the table companions with whom Jesus fellowships. A Jewish commentary on Exodus 18:1 says, "*Let*

not a man associate with the wicked, not even to bring him to the law.” Jesus is going totally against this rabbinic advice.

In answer to the criticism, Jesus tells three parables. All three have to do with joy over finding what was lost. First, a shepherd rejoices over finding the one lost sheep out of a hundred; next, a woman rejoices to find the one coin she had lost out of ten; finally, a father who has two sons gives a joyous banquet to celebrate the return of the one who had been lost, (Luke 15:1-32).

Chapter 15 has been called “the lost and found chapter.” It has also been called the heart of the third gospel. This chapter introduces a larger unit, running through 19:27, that presents a series of stories about outcasts. We will hear Jesus say, “*The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost,*” (19:10). The lost find in Jesus a Saviour; the proud and self-righteous find in Him a judge.

For a shepherd to have a flock of one hundred sheep was quite normal. It also marked him as being moderately rich. That such a shepherd would leave his flock in open country in search of one lost sheep seems a bit unrealistic. But the parable points to a love for the lost that goes beyond anything human; it is a divine love which seeks the lost.

The description Jesus gives of the shepherd joyfully returning home carrying the lost sheep on his shoulders is heart-warming. He bids his friends to come and celebrate with him the recovery

of one lost sheep. There is no mention at all of the 99 sheep out there in the open country. All attention is focused upon the lost sheep that was found. Jesus says that the same is true in heaven: there is more rejoicing over the lost sinner who repents than over the 99 righteous people who do not need to repent.

The suggestion that some people don't need to repent sounds like heresy to us. Jesus had said to the crowds, "*Unless you repent, you too will all perish,*" (13:5). We need to understand the statement of Jesus as a criticism of the Pharisees who thought they were so righteous that they did not need to repent. Jesus is saying to them, "*God is not rejoicing over you and your attitude; God is rejoicing over the lost sinner who repents.*"

God does not abandon us to our foolishness but seeks us out, calling us to repentance and to faith in the Gospel. Bring us home, dear Lord, and let there be joy in heaven. Grant us daily repentance. Amen!