# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“The Lost Sheep”**

**Luke 15:1-7**

 **September 4, 2022**

This morning we begin our fall sermon series on the Parables of Jesus. Parables are teachings of Jesus in which he uses everyday things, such as a shepherd and a lost sheep, to illustrate spiritual truth. I invite you to turn with me to Luke 15:1-7

Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them! So Jesus told them this story: “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!

Immediately before this passage, at the end of chapter 14, Jesus says: “Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!” Then, in chapter 15, the gospel writer introduces us to two groups of people who are hearing Jesus’ teaching, but only one group, the self-acknowledged sinners, is really listening. The other, the religious leaders, is too busy complaining about Jesus to listen and understand who he is and what his purpose is in the world. They have already condemned Jesus, for he associates with sinful people – he even eats with them! Well, of course he does. Back in chapter 5 of Luke’s gospel, Jesus said: “I have come to call sinners to repentance.” How is he going to do that unless he spends time with them and invites them to hear the good news that if they will confess their sin, God will forgive them and cleanse them of all that separates them from God?

These sinners to whom Jesus is bringing good news are viewed by the Pharisees as beneath the notice of God, let alone worthy of any kind of relationship with God. Their attitude is typified by the prayer of the Pharisee in Luke 18:11-12 in which he, praying loudly in the temple, proclaims, “I thank you, God, that I am not like other people – cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I’m certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.” The Pharisees had a saying: “There is joy before God when those who provoke him perish from the world.” Some of you have come out of a background of that kind of religious expression which says: “Have nothing to do with people who provoke God.” Entry into heaven is only for people like us who keep the rules and regulations. Along comes Jesus, and he doesn’t allow the regulations of the Pharisees, or their false statements about his heavenly Father, to interfere with his ministry. Let’s take a closer look at his parable.

How do sheep get lost? They get lost because they have the tendency to wander off without thinking. Nibbling a tuft of green grass, the sheep looks ahead and sees the next tuft and moves to nibble at it. Then another and another. The next thing you know the sheep has nibbled itself away from the flock. “All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own” (Isaiah 53:6). Will anyone come looking for us?

“For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost” (Luke 19:10). The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine and goes after the one. Jesus is painting a picture of the activity of God, as expressed in the person of Jesus himself. He left heaven to come and find us, humbling himself and becoming a human being. Then he died for us so that we who are lost may be saved. He did this because he loves each one of us. I know we say it so often that it can sound more like a cliché than the amazing truth that it is, but Jesus does love us. We are the apple of his eye. If Jesus had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If he had an iPhone, he’d be showing your image to all the angles. Love is what compels Jesus so seek and to save the lost.

When the shepherd has found and brought the lost sheep home, he calls his friends and neighbors together so they can rejoice with him that he has found his lost sheep. This brings Jesus to the primary spiritual truth illustrated by the everyday event of the story: “There is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away.” How entirely opposite of what the religious leaders proclaimed when they said there is joy in heaven when a sinner perishes.

The parable of the lost sheep exposes sinners to the magnificence of God’s searching love. It introduces them to the God who seeks them in order to save them, not to perish them from the world. It reveals that God rejoices when he welcomes sinners to heaven, not when they go to hell.

Why are God and his angels so happy about one repentant sinner? They know what heaven is like. They’ve seen the table laid out for us, they’ve heard the music being rehearsed for us, and they can’t wait to see our faces when we arrive because we will be amazed by the face-to-face love of God. From before the beginning of time, from before he created the universe, God has been seeking to bring us home. That is why it was worth it for Jesus to be the Good Shepherd who lay down his life for his sheep.