

“CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOSPEL MINISTRY”

Luke 15:1-24

In the name of Jesus Christ, who came to seek and to save the lost; Fellow Redeemed:

Jesus often told parables. A parable was not only an effective teaching device; it was also a means through which Jesus taught higher spiritual truths about the kingdom of God.

This is certainly true of today’s text, Luke 15:1-24—the parables of the *Lost Sheep*, *Lost Coin*, and *Lost Son*. The images in these parables are beautiful in and of themselves: the shepherd who searches for one lost sheep and carries it home on his shoulders; the woman who searches for one lost coin and rejoices when she finds it; and finally, the father who runs to embrace his lost son, years of joy in his eyes—nearly tripping in his haste for the reunion.

Yet, along with these beautiful images, we see the greater reality of Jesus the Good Shepherd, who came to seek and to save us. We see the greater reality of the heavenly Father, who welcomes us home with open arms of forgiveness when we return to Him in repentance and faith. Indeed, in the three lost-and-found parables of Luke 15, so richly colored by Christ’s own ministry, we also learn the way in which we are to minister to the lost with the Good News of salvation. We learn the characteristics of a true Gospel ministry.

But do we need such a lesson? Yes. Remember, Jesus spoke the parables of the *Lost Sheep*, *Lost Coin*, and *Lost Son* to the scribes and Pharisees; that is, the religious leaders of Israel: the pastors, teachers, and doctors of theology. Yet, for all their religious learning, the scribes and Pharisees knew little of God’s love for the lost sinner and little of how lost they were themselves.

Instead of reaching out to the lost, the scribes and Pharisees often erected barriers. In essence, they locked the church doors and turned off the lights. They considered people like tax collectors, notorious sinners, Samaritans, and Gentiles to be beyond the scope of even God’s redemptive love; as undesirables to be avoided in the same way that priest in the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* avoided the beaten, bleeding, half-dead man lying in the middle of the road. “Turn away. Walk around. Don’t get involved. Not my responsibility. Someone else will come along.”

And when these same religious leaders saw Jesus not only welcoming sinners but even eating with them, they were incensed. They “muttered,” Luke 15:2. The Greek words means to complain loudly. Across the millennia, we can almost hear them muttering, can’t we? “Who is this Jesus? How can He associate with such people? How can He welcome sinners or waste His time on no-good tax-collectors. And to think some call Him the Messiah.”

Yet, according to Scripture, Jesus Christ is exactly the type of Messiah we need; the Savior who came to seek the lost, the unwanted, the undesirables, and the nobodies. This was His unique ministry, as He Himself explained in Luke 19:10, **“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”**

The ministry that Jesus committed to His Church is also one of seeking the lost; seeking, not saving. Saving is God’s work. Seeking is ours. So then, what are the characteristics of a Gospel ministry? Based on today’s text, let me suggest four: COMMITMENT, URGENCY, JOY, and GRATITUDE.

The first characteristic of a Gospel ministry is commitment. Note carefully. When the shepherd realized that one sheep was lost, he didn’t wait for a more convenient time to search. He went immediately and wholeheartedly. And where did he go? Into the dangerous terrain of the wilderness. That is commitment.

Likewise, when the woman realized that one coin was lost, she didn’t search for it indifferently. She searched diligently. In fact, the Greek verbs used to describe this woman’s actions are all in the present tense, that is, ongoing and relentless activity. She keeps the lamp lit. She continues to sweep, clean, look under sofa cushions and in dark corners and in unlikely places—“Where could that coin be?”—until at length she finds it. That is commitment.

And nowhere is this type of relentless, ongoing commitment better exemplified than in the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Consider this passage from Matthew 9: **“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”** By definition, sheep with no shepherd are lost sheep. Yes, Jesus welcomed the multitudes that came to Him, but first and foremost He went to them. He searched for them.

Some of the most heartwarming accounts in Scripture involve Jesus seeking lost and lonely individuals. He sought out little Zacchaeus, who was perched in a sycamore-fig tree hoping for a glimpse of Jesus. **“Zacchaeus,”** said Jesus, **“come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”** Jesus sought that that woman taken in the very act of adultery, saying, **“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”** The woman replied, **“No one, sir.”** And Jesus answered, **“Then neither do I condemn you. Go now and leave your life of sin.”** Jesus sought out the ostracized Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well; and hopeless Mary Magdalene at the sepulcher; and two grieving disciples as they traveled to Emmaus; and remorseful Simon Peter after his betrayal. Christ’s ministry was one of commitment and personal involvement. Our Gospel ministries must be committed too.

The second characteristic of a Gospel ministry is urgency. Why urgency?

Because like that lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son, countless people are lost too. Lost-ness comes in many forms, and none of the forms are pleasant. Surely, we all know the frustration of losing our way when traveling; or stumbling about in darkness during a power outage; or losing our keys, wallet, or the TV remote; and far worse, the terror of losing sight of our children in a crowded mall or airport.

When my son Justin was about eight, we took him to a soccer sign-up meeting at a large school. The meeting room was packed. It was night. One moment Justin was there, and the next moment he was gone. Like the woman who searched for the lost coin, we searched for our lost son inside and out. When we finally found him, he was leaning against our car, arms crossed, wondering where *we* had been. I might have spanked him, had I not been so relieved to find him.

At times, overwhelming problems—job loss, the death of a loved one, divorce, financial struggles, addictions, depression, illness—leave us feeling far more disoriented, far more alone, and far more uncertain of our surroundings and direction. You’ve heard people say, “Oh, I don’t know what to do. I feel so lost.” You’ve heard it. You’ve likely said it. I know I have.

Yet, there is a much worse type of lost-ness. The Bible teaches that all people are by nature LOST and condemned, without God and without hope. And they will be eternally lost, unless they come to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. And this is the reason for the urgency. This is the reason the hymnist wrote: “Let none hear you idly saying, ‘There is nothing I can do;’ while the souls of men are dying and the Master calls for you.”

In contrast to this terrible lost-ness, some of the most familiar and cherished passages of Scripture assure us that in Jesus Christ we will never be lost. In John 3:16, for example: “**For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish**”—the Greek word for perish is APOLLUMI, the very same word used in the parables of Luke 15 for lost; the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son. So, John 3:16 is more literally, ‘that whoever believes in Him shall not be LOST but have everlasting life.’”

The third characteristic of a Gospel ministry is welcoming the lost and rejoicing when they are found. Ministering to the lost is difficult, whether the lost are antagonistic unbelievers or straying Christians or people lost in a multitude of problems.

One year, while I was still pastoring a congregation in northern California, we decided to place an advertisement in a local newspaper. The headline read: ST. STEPHEN LUTHERAN WELCOMES YOU. The conclusion read: “We can help!” I received one phone call from that ad, and it lasted for nearly three hours. The caller was a man whose life had simply fallen apart. He had lost his wife through divorce. He had

lost the right to visit his children. He had lost his job. He had lost his health. He was so upset that he could barely finish a sentence without saying “excuse me, please” and taking a sip of water.

When I explained that I would gladly offer him the comfort of the Scriptures, but that I could do nothing about his divorce or child-custody agreement, he grew even more distraught. “But I’ve got your ad,” he said. I could hear him waving the newspaper in the background, “I’ve got your ad. And it says, ‘We can help!’” When I finally hung up the phone, my first thought was: “Okay. New rule. No more ads in the newspaper. It’s not worth the trouble.”

Sometimes, it is easier to stay with the ninety-nine obedient sheep than to look for the one that wandered away. Sometimes, it is easier to minister to people we consider worth the effort, rather than lost-causes we consider a waste of time. People in certain neighborhoods. People of certain races. People of certain social conditions. People lying in nursing homes like lost coins, or wandering homeless in the streets like lost sheep. “They’re not worth the effort. God can’t possibly love or want people like that.” The scribes and Pharisees thought exactly the same of those tax collectors and sinners. But they were wrong. God does love the lost. Not because they, or for that matter any of us, are worthy of His love, but because of His infinite and amazing grace.

The irony is that the accusation the scribes and Pharisees leveled against Jesus Christ—“**this man welcomes sinners and eats with them**”—was true. He did welcome sinners. He did eat with sinners. The irony is that this accusation is the very essence of the Gospel message. As Jesus said, “**The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.**” And as the three lost-and-found parables before us today testify, God Himself rejoices when even one lost sinner is found; when even one sinner ‘comes to his senses,’ Luke 15:17—a beautiful description of repentance—and comes home to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

The fourth characteristic of a Gospel ministry is personal gratitude to God. Our previous hymn, *Amazing Grace*, was written by John Newton in 1779. For the past two centuries, this song has been heard, sung, and loved by untold millions. Indeed, *Amazing Grace* may be the most recorded song in our modern era, appearing on 6,600 albums and recorded by such celebrities as Aretha Franklin, Joan Baez, Ray Charles, Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, and Elvis Presley.

But why has *Amazing Grace* remained so popular? Some would say it is the song’s simple melody. Others credit the lyrics: “Amazing grace—how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” Or, “Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come; ‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.” Ironically, still others attribute the song’s widespread popularity to its lack of lyrics, that is, to what it does not say. To paraphrase one article I read: ‘*Amazing Grace* does not use the word hell

or Christ, so it appeals to all denominations.’

Yet, John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*, would be the first to insist that there is no amazing grace apart from Jesus Christ, apart from His blood and sacrifice. But this was not always the case with John Newton. Born in 1725, Newton was the son of a Puritan mother and seafaring father. His mother died while he was still a boy. By his eleventh birthday, he was accompanying his father on sea voyages. He became a skilled sailor and an avid slave-trader. At that time of his life, Newton had no sympathy for his human cargo and no love for his God. He was an avowed atheist.

Later, after a number of misfortunes, Newton was led by the Holy Spirit to know and believe in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Eventually, he became an ordained minister in the Anglican Church, where he would write three hundred and eighty hymns, eight of which are in our own Lutheran Hymnal. Yet, *Amazing Grace* has remained his most cherished hymn. And I think I know why. When John Newton wrote the words, “I once was lost but now I’m found,” he was writing about himself. His personal experience with God’s grace in Christ is what enabled him to write such personal lyrics for others.

You see, the parables of Luke 15 aren’t just about lost sheep, lost coins, and lost sons. They are about us. Each of us was that lost sheep. Each of us was that lost coin. Each of us was that lost son.

Of the three lost-and-found parables of Luke 15, the *Parable of the Lost Son* is my favorite. Part of the reason lies in my love of homecomings. When only fifteen, I left my home in Florida to attend Immanuel Lutheran High School in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Almost imperceptibly, high school became college; college, seminary; and seminary, ministry—which led to many other changes in my life. For more than four decades, my life was really a series of homecomings, each more anticipated and treasured than the last.

And even greater reason for my appreciation of the *Parable of the Lost Son* is that I too have been one; too often running away from my heavenly Father, forgetting even to wave goodbye, pursuing foolish ambitions or desires that inevitably led me to the same pigpen and empty husks. And yet, each time I came to my senses, the heavenly Father welcomed me home with wide open arms.

Indeed, it is the image of the father in this parable that comforts me most of all. When we look at our lives and misdeeds, our regrets and failings, we often wonder how even God could forgive us or welcome us home. But in this parable, told by none other than God the Son Himself, we have our answer. Whenever we come to our senses and return to God in repentance, He always welcomes us home. Not only does He welcome us, but He runs to meet us. He embraces us despite the pig-stink on our clothing. He

celebrates our return.

How comforting to know that when we do run away, the Father's love goes with us. And it is the Father's love that brings us safely home. And this is precisely where a true Gospel ministry begins; in the grace and love and forgiveness that God has shown to each one of us.

Such was clearly true of the apostle Paul. What drove this great apostle of the Christian Church to share the Gospel of Christ everywhere, with everyone, and in the face of untold hardships and suffering? The answer is: Paul's personal gratitude for God's grace in Jesus Christ. In fact, you can hear the gratitude in the words Paul wrote to young Pastor Timothy.

He said, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me faithful, appointing me to His service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display His unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on Him and receive eternal life," 1 Timothy 1:12-16.

So then, the characteristics of a true Gospel ministry are commitment, urgency, joy, and gratitude. May we as individuals and as members of this Christian congregation search for the lost in the same loving and dedicated way in which Jesus Christ searched for us.