

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Luke 15:1-10

“God’s Amazing Grace”

Have you ever lost something that is very important to you? You can't remember where the keys are; you can't remember where you put your phone; you can't remember where your glasses are – and so you have to go find that second pair that isn't quite as strong or as good as the good pair; you just put them down. These are just a few of the things that we can misplace and many of us have misplaced. My Mom, who was a devout Roman Catholic, she is now with the Lord, and she used to say, “ask St. Anthony to help you and you will find it.” You may have heard that said. And then there is St. Jude – the patron saint of ‘lost causes.’ So many Roman Catholics pray to him to help them in their darkest hour. Let's think personally of something that you need, depend on and cannot do without. A dropped pill, a dropped contact lens that you are afraid will dry out, and it is the last one of the pair, and you frantically search for it. That lens, that pill is very important you do not want to leave where it is because a pet or child could get to it. You turn the place upside down; your blood pressure starts to rise – you could really use that pill right now - and your frustration level is through the roof. How many of us sit down and give it to Him? I must tell you that I have been given new eyes – when I found Jesus in a whole new way and accepted a personal relationship with Him, I found that there is no need to pray to anyone but Him. I honor what my family and others do, I will never put it down, but personally for me and for many of you present here today, we go to the ‘big guy’ and as I have taught so many of us here to pray these words - “help me Jesus!” He will, and He has. So many times when something seems lost, or I feel somewhat lost – He answers that prayer in such awesome ways. I have heard from many of you who have prayed “help me Jesus” when losing keys, glasses, wallet, phone – that He is gracious and true and helps you to see where you left them.

Jesus, in today's Holy Gospel, talks about things that appear lost. He begins with the wonderful parable about the shepherd who goes after the one lost sheep, leaving the other 99 in order to search for that one. When the shepherd finds it – he rejoices and puts the sheep on his shoulders to celebrate. This shepherd goes home calling his friends and neighbors to celebrate because he has found his one lost sheep. Jesus goes on to give an illustration about a woman who was experiencing just that type of loss. He says, “*suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'* In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:8-10) In that day Jesus wasn't saying that the person picked up their iPhone, cell phone or wall phone and called their neighbor and said, ‘hey come on over – I found my coin!’ No, this person would go out into the street surrounding their house and call out to their neighbors rejoicing. That coin could have been her savings, or an important payment that she could not do without. Sometimes we miss the importance of it.

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It is important to note that immediately following this Gospel message, Jesus told of the man who had two sons. We know this as either the Parable of the Prodigal Son, or of the Forgiving Father. The younger son basically said his father was dead to him and demanded his inheritance and went and squandered it. The parable goes on that after working as a hired hand in a foreign country. We know it is a foreign country because this man is in with pigs, and there are no pigs in Israel – I can tell you that! And then the son returns having a repentant heart. The father sees him coming and he just doesn't stand there and says 'kiss my ring.' No, he runs to him, not waiting. He throws a celebration and says, "*For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.*" So they began to celebrate." (Luke 15:24) He was lost and is found. This is powerful!

Did you notice what was taking place at the beginning of the Gospel reading? Tax Collectors and sinners were gathering near Jesus just to hear what He had to say. The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law didn't like it one bit. They were judging the crowd around Jesus and said, "*This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.*" (Luke 15:2) These hypocritical men were judging not only those with Jesus, but Jesus Himself. Shouldn't they have been asking themselves, "how can we help these people?" The tax-collectors were disliked not just because they were tax-collectors – nobody much likes them in any culture – but because they were collecting money for either Herod or the Romans, or both. Not the most popular people! If they were in regular contact with Gentiles, they would be considered unclean. The 'sinners' are a more general category, and we don't know who exactly they were. They may just have been people who were too poor to know the Law properly or to try to keep it. Listen to these words from John 7:49, "*this mob that knows nothing of the law--there is a curse on them.*" I would venture to say that they had been regarded by these "experts of the Law" as not very religious people and out of touch with what God expected of His people through the law. To them it was all about doing, and status. In today's reading from Paul's first letter to Timothy, he talks about his own past and I want to share with you these words: "*I thank Christ Jesus, my Lord, who has given me strength that He considered me faithful appointing me to His service. Even though I was once considered a blasphemer, 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.*" Wow! Another example of God's loving forgiveness. Just unbelievable!

The lost can be found and sinners need to repent. When people follow Jesus and His way, that is the "true" repentance, and although Jesus doesn't say it, I believe He implies that the Pharisees and legal experts need to repent in that very same way. I think that is what Jesus meant when He said, "*I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.*" (Luke 15:7)

To me, the point of these two parables is pretty clear. As far as these legal experts and Pharisees were concerned, the closest you that could get to heaven was the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple required strict purity from the priests; and the closest that non-priests

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could get to heaven was to follow the Law with strict purity in every aspect of their life. Here is Jesus 'hitting them right where they live' by saying that heaven would be rejoicing every time a single sinner saw the light and began to follow God's way. Jesus was indeed saying that the lost could not only be found, but saved.

I believe that the point Jesus was making in the parable of the one and ninety-nine is that the sheep was lost and the shepherd would do anything to get it back. Can you just imagine the impact this would have on repentant sinners? They didn't have to earn God's love or Jesus' respect. God loves every single one of His children, and would be coming looking for them, and celebrated finding them. This is huge, this was the grace of Almighty God, and was directly the opposite of the teachings. Keeping the law was important to show love to God, but you don't have to earn heaven. Accepting Jesus and seeking His forgiveness means salvation. That my friends is called grace.

What Jesus did in welcoming the company of Tax Collectors and sinners, I believe is the ultimate reason why the Pharisees strongly objected to these parables, and His teachings because Jesus' actions and His illustrations of the lost - reflected what God's grace was doing among them. Jesus' actions on earth corresponded directly and exactly to God's love in heaven. How many of us were that one who was lost, and then redeemed by Our Savior? It didn't need to be dramatic – or a mountain top experience – but just a feeling like nothing you have ever felt before – of security and love – and ultimately forgiveness.

Jesus said, *“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”* (Luke 15:7) I have to admit that these words bring to mind some beautiful words written by a former captain of a slave trading ship, who later became an Anglican priest. John Newton's hymn reflects that forgiveness and redemption are possible regardless of sins committed and that the lost soul can be delivered from despair through the mercy, love and the wonderful grace of God.

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
T'was blind but now I see.”