

A few chapters after our Gospel text for today, when Jesus calls Zacchaeus, He gives a wonderful, succinct explanation for why He came. “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” That truth is what He is teaching in the parables we hear today. In our text, the Lord shows us who are the lost, how He seeks the lost, and what happens when the lost are found.

In both these parables, we hear about someone seeking after something that is lost, be it a shepherd seeking a lost sheep or a woman seeking a lost coin. In either case, the point is that the lost is completely dependent on the one seeking it in order to be restored.

In the example of the lost sheep, there’s the idea that we have willingly wandered from our God. Isaiah says much the same thing as He describes our sinful condition and why the Lord must come as the Suffering Servant to save us. He writes, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way.” Our sinful nature always leads us away from Christ.

Christians are tempted to stray because they think following the world’s ways will be better for them than God’s way. The world and its prince the devil love to portray God’s word as outdated, foolish, or even hateful. Temptation is increased when we see other sheep wandering from the truth and think, “If they’re doing it, I must be able to do it too.” And often times, if we give into temptation, it feels good to our sinful flesh, and we think, “Maybe the Bible wasn’t right about this. Maybe this isn’t actually sinful.”

With the coin, we see how we are helpless to find our way back to God. We’d like to think that if we just try hard enough, do enough good, follow our hearts, or whatever else, we’re able to restore ourselves to God. And really, that’s the premise for just about every other religion: earn your way to paradise or nirvana or eternal peace by what you do.

But the Christian faith, the truth, is very much the opposite. Just like that coin is a dead piece of metal that can’t do anything to help be found, we are unable to help God with our salvation. Think about some of the descriptions the Bible gives about our condition before being brought to faith. In Ephesians 2 we read, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked.” Or as David writes in two different psalms, “They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” Or the words of Jesus in John 6, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” Like the coin, and like the sheep, you and I and all people are lost and condemned until Christ seeks us out.

And how is it that He seeks us out? By His word! At the beginning of the reading, why are the tax collectors and sinners drawing near to Jesus? To hear his words! They are there to hear the Good News of the Kingdom of God, the message of salvation and deliverance and hope.

The words of Jesus are the voice of the Good Shepherd, giving comfort and peace to the sheep in whatever place they have been lost or trapped. The words of Jesus are the woman’s broom,

sweeping away the dust of lies and deception that would cover up and keep someone from Him, and they are the light of the lamp, driving out the darkness and revealing the truth to those in its rays.

These words of Jesus are so powerful because they aren't just empty platitudes or appealing slogans. No, they are the truth of God Himself, containing the power of God unto salvation. They point of the reality of sin, the hopelessness of man's condition, the eternal judgment that is coming. Jesus doesn't water down the truth to make it more palatable; He tells it like it is.

At the same time, He gives the full comfort of the Gospel. He tells of the faithfulness of God who has kept His promise and at last come to save humanity from its doom. Jesus speaks of the love of God who came to seek out every lost sheep, and He shows forth that love in healing the sick, cleansing the lepers, granting sight to the blind, even bringing the dead back to life.

And above all this, Jesus speaks of how He has come to make atonement for the sin of the world. He affirms the preaching of His forerunner, John the Baptist, who physically pointed to Jesus and declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." He teaches His disciples that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus even foretells how this will all take place, speaking of the cross and declaring, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

The word of God is powerful, both because God works through it by His almighty power to change hearts and minds in ways we can't understand, and also because it deals with real things, like the real God who took on real human flesh and blood so that He would really die on a cross outside Jerusalem on a Friday and the really rise again in His real body.

When we hear those beautiful words of Holy Scripture, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends," that grants such comfort not because its just a poetic proverb or something, but because it describes what God in Christ has actually done for each and every one of us!

Encountering this great word, being found in our lost state by Jesus, has definite effects. The word never goes out and returns empty. One of those effects we hear of in our reading in that of repentance. The joy in heaven that Jesus speaks of happens when a sinner repents.

Now as Scripture makes clear in many places, repentance isn't just feeling sorry. That's part of it, the conviction that you truly are lost and truly have sinned against the God who loves you. But it also involves two other things. It involves faith, namely believing that Jesus calls to repent because He loves you and that He has died for your sins and deeply desires to forgive you and restore you to Himself. It also involves a change of life, or what John the Baptist refers to as the fruits of repentance. The word "repent" in Hebrew literally means "to turn." It is a turning away from sin and turning back to God.

Interestingly, it's repentance (or lack thereof) that is the difference between the tax collectors and sinners and the Pharisees and scribes. Both groups hear the words of Jesus. And so both groups are being led to repent, to trust in Christ, to turn from their sins and back to God.

Yet when the Pharisees and scribes hear this, they refuse. Rather than plead for God's mercy and rejoice in His grace, they grumble and look to their own perceived righteousness. They speak against Jesus, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." They think that by their own efforts, they're righteous. They're good enough. They don't need to change their ways. They are like sheep who hear the shepherd's voice and go running further into the thorns.

But the tax collectors and other sinners hear the words of Jesus and delight in them. Think of Zacchaeus, the tax collector who gives back all he's stolen – and a lot more – and follows Jesus. Or St. Matthew, who likewise walks away from his tax booth to be a disciple. Or St. Paul, who as we heard about last week gives up his authority and prestige as a leading Pharisee to follow Jesus, even though that path will lead to much suffering and finally martyrdom. When Jesus found all these lost sheep and granted them the gift of repentance, they gladly let Him put them on His shoulders, trusting that wherever He was bringing them, it was so much better than where they had been.

Jesus also teaches in this parable that when He finds the lost, He then brings them back to His people, the Church. When the shepherd finds the lost sheep, he doesn't just leave it where he found it, happy to just know where it is. Nor would the woman go through all that effort to find her lost coin, and then once she's found it, just leave it lying where it was.

No, the shepherd would bring the sheep back to the rest of the flock. The woman would place the coin with the other nine, having all ten in the same money bag or chest. When Jesus finds lost sinners, He not only calls them to repentance and gives them new lives, He also leads them back into the gathering of the other sinners who He has called and redeemed. The Christian faith isn't just a personal relationship with Jesus. Yes, that's there, but it's at the same time a relationship tied to all the other believers.

In another parable, Jesus speaks of gathering together His sheep from many places. Yet though they come from many places, He says that there will be "one flock, one Shepherd." A wolf would gladly attack a sheep lost by itself in the woods, but it will think twice before attacking a whole flock, especially one being watched over by a shepherd. Likewise, a Christian who doesn't join together with other Christians in corporate worship, or to state it plainly, who doesn't go to church, is putting himself in great spiritual danger. It's a lot easier to fall into temptation, or become lost in despair, or pridefully wander down false paths, if you're all by yourself. God gives us the Church so that we can help build up one another, hold each other accountable, comfort each other in times of sorrow, and bear one another's burdens in times of need.

The parable also shows another blessing of the Church. It's a lot harder to use your money if you have every single coin stashed somewhere different in your house. Money is much more useful when it's all gathered together, in your wallet or your bank account. Likewise, when we gather together as Christians, we're able to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ and serve our neighbors in their need much more effectively than what any one of us could do by himself.

Being brought out of our lost state by our Lord and gathered into His Church brings eternal, heavenly joy. We're constantly tempted to think that this world can grant us true happiness and joy.

And as we said before, when we give into earthly temptation, it often does bring us some joy. But that joy is shallow, and temporary, and actually leads to greater sadness and pain later on as it drives us further from Christ.

For true joy, we look to Jesus, and to His own example. The path He walked on this world was one full for hardship and suffering, and it led Him to the cross. But how does He speak about this in His word? He speaks about it as joy! We read in Hebrews 12 about how Jesus, “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” For all that His suffering and death entailed, Jesus could go to it with joy, because He knew that through it He would wipe away the sins of the world and restore His wandering sheep to Himself.

Jesus, as well as the Father and the Holy Spirit, find absolute joy in every single person who repents of his sins and is brought back to His loving arms. This joy is so great that it fills heaven, being reflected by the countless angels who sing songs of praise to God Almighty every time a soul is rescued from the domain of darkness and brought into the Kingdom of Christ.

This is the joy that our Lord desires to share with us. We are not only the lost sheep and lost coin that are restored, bringing great joy when we are brought to salvation. We are also those friends and neighbors invited by the Lord to share in His joy. Christ calls out, “Rejoice with me!” and pours that joy into our hearts. That is the joy we have when we sing hymns of praise, when we speak our thanksgivings in prayer, when we delight in the gifts He gives to us and the blessings they bring.

And that joy will never fade away, but will grow and grow as our Lord one day brings us into the halls of heaven, where we too will hear the angels rejoice and join in with them. There, we will be reunited with the eternal flock of God, gathered in joy around our Good Shepherd forever.

In the name of Jesus, amen.