

Luke 15: 1-10

The Lord is on the search for the lost.

This becomes clear after the Pharisees and the scribes grumble, when they see Jesus receiving sinners and eating with them. They talk about Jesus as 'this man' who 'receives sinners and eats with them.' The Lord then responds with three different parables, who basically deal with the same topic: A shepherd who has 100 sheep and loses one; a woman who has ten coins and loses one and a man who has two sons and loses one (the prodigal son). Every parable the percentage of that what is lost, becomes bigger.

It is a theme we can all relate to. I have been searching a lot. My keys. My wallet. My mobile phone. My glasses. I'm very good at searching, but I could do better when it comes to finding. It helps to put things on a fixed place. But still.... The last item, the glasses, is the worst. Try to find your glasses without having them on! But He who searches will find, so I almost always find what I'm searching for. How much more the Lord, who is on the search for the lost.

1. The lost (sheep)

Today, we look at the lost sheep. Our view of this parable is influenced by nice songs and beautiful Sunday school stories about a sheep and a friendly shepherd. In the Sunday school we hear often that after a long search, the shepherd finds his sheep who has fallen in a ditch. He climbs down and carries the sheep on his shoulders. Everybody is happy. The end.

Jesus, however, didn't dispute the fact that the tax collectors and sinners are what they are: sinners. People in need of God. People who acted against God's will. They thus far lived without God and they needed repentance.

What Jesus shows is that the heart of God is different from what the Pharisees thought it was. But they were right about one thing: the lost are the lost. They have to be found by God. In Luke 15, it is the triune God who is searching. The Shepherd is the Son, the Holy Spirit's work is that of the woman and the Father resembles God the Father.

First the Son, the Good Shepherd. Jesus says later in the book of Luke that He, as the Son of Man, came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19.10).

The second parable talks about a woman, who pictures the work of the Holy Spirit. The coin is fallen in a dark place, just as we sinners are. This is how the Spirit works. A lamp is lighted, it illuminates sinners who are brought to conviction about their sins and subsequently repent and turn to Jesus as their Lord.

The last part of Luke 15 focuses on God the Father, who is waiting. He runs toward the lost sinner at the first sign of repentance.

The whole of God's being is involved in searching and finding the lost!

The lost sheep is really lost. I did a bit of reading and listening to sermons about the topic of God calling himself a Shepherd and us his sheep. What strikes me is that sheep are plain stupid. It is a sort of an insult to be called sheep. Sheep are the stupidest animals you can imagine. When they get lost, they will indeed in their search for food tumble into clefts, fall off

mountains and die, or harm themselves through all kind of stupid actions. They are very gifted in one thing: getting themselves in trouble.

Jesus points to this stupid behavior of sheep. One is lost. Just as the sinners and tax collectors were. How stupid! The sheep had a good shepherd. Now, what do you think the Shepherd will do? The shepherd goes and leaves the other 99 in the field, probably with a fellow shepherd, and searches as long as it takes to find the lost sheep.

That is what happens from the perspective of the shepherd.

The perspective of the lost sheep is different. He must repent, says verse seven. The word used in Greek means *changing one's mind*. The sheep is lost and this word for repentance -changing one's mind- suggests that his mindset was wrong. His focus was off. He was wandering around; he purposefully left the protection of the shepherd. In his mind, the grass of the neighbor was greener.

The sin of the lost sheep seems to be an always wandering heart. It isn't that he doesn't know about the shepherd. But his mind is on other things. Like the tax-collector. His mind was on making money the easy way. Money was like a replacement for God. He liked it so much, that he started to run after it. He liked it better than serving God, better than following Christ. That is how he got lost. But Jesus calls him to repentance.

Maybe that sheep is you. You sit here in the church. But your heart has been somewhere else. Your mind has been on other things. You have no peace in your heart. Maybe there is envy in your heart. You might be entangled in gossiping. Maybe you have been in illegitimate relationships. Maybe you are so hurt that you closed the door as you thought that God couldn't heal your wounds. Maybe you are a slave of alcohol, pornography, drugs or entertainment. Know that, whatever our situation is, we are not beyond God's reach. He is on the search, he wants you to hear his voice, to repent, to be carried on his shoulders and to experience forgiveness, healing, joy, love and peace.

Because that is what God is doing in the meantime while the lost are being lost. God himself is on the search for them. That is why Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. He is not saying by sharing his table that their lives are okay as they are, and that they can continue to do whatever pleases them. No! He eats with them to show his love and to convey the message that there's a whole new life for them if they were to change their mind, leave the old, and embrace the love of God in Jesus Christ. The Shepherd is Jesus, who shows God's love, and guides sinners to a whole new destination: the joyful reality of the Kingdom of God.

2. The Joy of the Lord

That Joy, the abundant Kingdom-joy connects the three parables. The woman calls her neighbors and friends. The Father calls his friends and slaughters a young calf and starts to celebrate. The Shepherd does the same. He does not only rejoice when he finds his sheep, he also invites his friends to rejoice with him. And Jesus adds: 'so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety- nine righteous persons who need no repentance.' Joy is the keyword in this parable and part of the structure of the three. The three parables tell the same story thrice: you lose something, search it, find it, rejoice about it and invite others to share the joy.

Why is the joy this important? It shows us the heart of God's love. He is a God of love and mercy, who doesn't treat us according to our deeds, but blots out our sins. We people, we judge. We put others in different categories and one of them is: the unreachable. There are people who are, according to our little system, beyond reach. But God is different. He is on the search of the unreachable. He does everything to find sinners. That is the essence of the good news: Jesus came to seek and save the lost. And that is exactly what happens here. The lost is found, and Jesus adds: there is a celebration in heaven over one sinner, who repents. All the angels and God the Father, the Son and the holy Spirit rejoice. There is a celebration in heaven over one sinner who is found, over one person who repents and turns back to the Lord.

The joy of the Lord is the total opposite of the moody, cantankerous and murmuring scribes and pharisees. God wants sinners to be saved, he wants the lost to be found and it doesn't come automatically. Jesus had to give it all. The good Shepherd gave his life for the sheep. And how could he do that? He was able to endure the cross and despise the shame because Jesus pictured the joy that was before him: the joy of having us saved through his blood.

3. The joy of the Lord is our Strength.

That is the third point. The first was 'the lost', the second 'the joy of the Lord' at finding what he searches for and the third: that same joy is our strength. But how? The parable helps us to understand how we share in the Kingdom-joy. Let's go step by step through the parable and focus on the way joy blesses us:

(1) Through hearing The grumbling critics did not want to listen and refused to sit at Jesus feet. The last words of Jesus before this chapter are: let he who has ears to hear, hear. The critics did not listen. But the tax collectors and sinners did. They drew near to hear Jesus (15:1). That is where the Kingdom-joy starts: through hearing the voice of the Shepherd, of Jesus.

(2) Through repentance. The joy increases through repentance. Repentance and joy in heaven is connected. We humans experience that as well. When we repent from our sins or from a particular sin, we come to ourselves. David says somewhere: when I kept silent, my bones wasted away... and he prays: restore unto me the joy of thy salvation. Experiencing forgiveness is a spiritual reality. It brings restoration, peace, healing and ultimately: joy.

(3) Through being with the Shepherd. The Kingdom-joy even increases when the Shepherd comes to us and restores us. He picks us up and puts us on his shoulders. We are saved now. We are safe. You don't have to worry anymore about your life, about being lost, about your sins. You are with the Shepherd. He knows you by name. He came to the rescue for you personally. You are much loved by God. The Shepherd gives his life to save you personally. What a joy to know you are loved.

(4) Through searching for the Loss We saw in the beginning of our sermon how the three parables point to the Triune God. Church father Ambrose of Milan already points to this. The three parables are like a threefold cord, showing a threefold remedy. He asks: Who is the father, the shepherd and the woman? His answer is: God the Father, Christ and the Church. So, he hesitates to compare the woman with the Holy Spirit. She is the church. And it is the church who must be on the search for the lost.

The church shares the mission of Jesus and goes out to show and share God's love, healing, and forgiveness with the people around her, with people who so desperately need Jesus' love. The Lord encourages us as his church, through this parable, to love people who are lost. We are called to love the white-board criminals, the prostitutes, the homeless, the critics of our faith, our non-Christian friends and neighbors and to go and share our lives and the life and work of Jesus with them. What a joy it is when one person repents and finds new life in Jesus. Not only heaven rejoices, but the church on earth as well.

(5) Finally, we increase our joy by sitting at his table

At the end, we all have fallen short of God's glory. We all are sinners in need of redemption. Think about the story of the prodigal son. The eldest son results to be as much in need of grace, as the prodigal one.

We will in a minute at the giving of communion confess our sins and unworthiness with the ancient words: 'We do not presume to come to this your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table. But you are the same Lord whose nature is always to have mercy.'

We share in the joy of the kingdom. The critics are right when they say: this man receives sinners and eats with them. We joyfully answer: 'amen! He surely does. He eats with us, sinners. What a Savior He is!'

Glory be to the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen