

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

CARRIED AWAY BY GRACE

Luke 15:1-10

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Analysis by Eric W. Evers

1 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 So he told them this parable: 4 "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? 5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' 7 Just 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. 8 "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' 10 Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

DIAGNOSIS: I'm Not Lost!

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Prideful*

They're almost too easy a target, aren't they? The Pharisees wear their pride on their sleeves. Grumbling disdain for the "sinners" is simply an expression of their own sense of superiority. In the Pharisaical mind, "sinner" is a label that always applies elsewhere. They have risen above such folk, after all, with their observances, their righteousness, and their clear separation from anything that could render them unclean. At least, that's how they perceive it.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Unshepherded*

Of course, such a holier-than-thou attitude is more than annoying. It is also an anthropology with profound theological consequences. Pharisaical pride imagines that the focus of God's attention and affection will be on them, because of their purity and respectability. But the parables Jesus tells undercut such a theological vision. Where is God's attention? Not on the "already-found," but on the "lost." The Shepherd is to be found not with the gathered flock, but out in pursuit of the missing sheep. The Pharisees, then, have a God problem: they believe God is to be found lavishing his approval on them, when in reality, his heart is elsewhere. And so, instead of being comfortably near the divine shepherd, these Pharisees are the last spiritual place they would ever imagine themselves to be: far and distant from God and his purposes.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Lost*

Can there be a more profound picture of lost-ness? The Pharisees think they are right where they should be, and so would never imagine, in their pride, to stop and ask directions. "Asking directions," is, of course, a part of repenting, something that Jesus says will cause a lot of joy in heaven. The implication is that where there is no repenting, there is no joy in heaven.

Unaware of divine disapproval, therefore, because they are unaware of where God's heart is, all these Pharisees can do is heap up more and more disapproval for themselves, more and more wrath.

PROGNOSIS: I've Been Found!

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal solution) – Pursued

But wrath is not the end of the story. Mercy trumps judgment, even for the self-righteous, and so out the divine Shepherd goes, pursuing those who are lost and don't even know it. The promise of mercy chases the pride-hardened heart. But in the Resurrection, Jesus has already out-chased pride. We did our best (worst?) to send the Shepherd away. But his heart remains fixed with affection on us, the errant sheep.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Carried

So yes, the parable does raise the question of repentance, but not as a work for us to do. The Shepherd scoops us up in his loving arms, so that the one who repents can only ask, "How could I do otherwise? The Savior kept on pursuing me!" And thus there is no room for pride, because the one being welcomed home with celebration knows that he has done nothing to earn it. He is swept up, literally, in God's joy.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Pursuing

And now the sinner-carried-into-sainthood knows where God's heart is to be found – out among the other sinners. How can the found one do anything but follow? And thus the inversion is complete. The Pharisees believe that a saint can be found only among other saints. But a saved sinner knows that saints belong among sinners, carrying the message of the Shepherd's saving love.