

26 September 2004
Pentecost 17

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Unimaginable Mercy”

Text: Luke 15:1-10 (Exodus 32:7-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus is concerned with individuals, not numbers. If you are concerned with numbers, the two parables that Jesus spoke, and which we heard today, make no sense to you. In fact, they are quite ludicrous! For why would *anyone* leave the 99 good, healthy, behaving sheep – leave them alone, in jeopardy and danger – to go and search for the one who wandered away?? Why would *anyone* spend *more* money on a party for finding a lost coin than was the value of the lost coin? If you are concerned with numbers, these things make no sense to you at all. But by asking such questions, we show that we do not have the mind of Christ. The mind of Christ where each individual life is of infinite worth. Where each individual life is worth His own.

And so the parables that we heard today show us the mercy of God – a mercy which, quite frankly, is too much for us to imagine or grasp. We can only, by faith, believe it, and thank God for it. For without this mercy, we would all have long ago been not only lost, but destroyed.

The first two readings we heard today give us a picture of this mercy, that we may believe it. That we may believe that this is who God has always been and what He has always given to His people. First we heard from the Old Testament, the book of Exodus. God had just rescued His people from the land of Egypt, from their 400 year slavery, with wondrous plagues. He had parted the Red Sea for them, allowing His people to cross on dry land, but then sweeping it back over the Egyptian army, destroying them. Then as they entered the desert of Sinai, God provided them with manna to eat, and water from a rock to drink. He protected them from their enemies. What more could God have done for His people? . . . And yet, we heard today how they repaid Him. They built an idol, a golden calf, in imitation of what they had seen the people in Egypt doing, and they proclaimed: ***“These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”*** . . . You couldn’t blame God for being just a little bit angry about that!

And yet, at the prayer of Moses (and what a gift Moses turned out to be for his people!),

God relented. He did not give His people what they deserved. He did not turn His anger against them. He didn't give up on them and choose a different people – ones who would be appropriately grateful. God had mercy on His people. For that is who God is, and what He does: He shows mercy. As we sang in the Introit: ***“The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.”***

Then we heard from the Epistle of St. Paul to his young partner-pastor Timothy. And we see that the mercy of God is even greater here. For we hear of God showing mercy not to His people, but to *an enemy*. Paul, as he freely admits, was ***“a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent”*** of God and His Church. Taking every opportunity to persecute, kill, and otherwise damage and put out of business these new churches that were following Jesus Christ. If the early church had put out a deck of playing cards with their most-wanted enemies on them (like our military did in Iraq), Paul would have been the Ace of Spades. . . . And yet God had mercy on Paul. God came to Him in love and mercy, not destroying Paul, but searching Him out. Without Paul asking, without any merit or worthiness in Paul, God saved him, with no less a miraculous intervention than as He did with His people so many years ago in Egypt. Paul was the ***“worst of sinners,”*** and yet God, in His mercy, would not let him perish. God in His mercy went after him. God in His mercy cared about this man whom all other Christians feared, and hated. And again we see, ***“The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.”***

What is this mercy of God? That would rescue ungrateful, calf-worshipping people? That would rescue an enemy who was trying to destroy His Church? That would rescue people like you and me?

This is mercy the Scribes and Pharisees didn't understand . . . or didn't want to understand. They grumbled against Jesus, and accused Him, saying, ***“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”*** But so it has been all along with God. And so it will continue to be. There is perhaps no more sure sign of the presence of God than to be surrounded by sinners! For that's who He came for. Those are His people!

Each and every one of them. Each and every one who came out of Egypt, and each and every one like Paul. One at a time, He searches them out. One at a time, He calls them to receive His mercy. And though they may reject Him and work against Him, they cannot stop Him. This is who God is, and what He does. Sinful women, prostitutes, tax collectors, Pharisees, Sadducees, persecutors of His Church, lepers, outcasts – Jesus can't help Himself! He came for them. He came for all sinners. He surrounds Himself with these people. These people are His people.

And so it is today, in this place. Jesus is here in His Word and Sacrament, surrounded by

sinner. Sinners in the community, sinners in these pews, and the sinner in this pulpit. And He is here not in judgment, but in mercy. Here to give; here to forgive; here to make you His own. Not concerned with numbers is Jesus. For He only has eyes for you. Each one of you. No matter how many or how few gather, His mercy, love, and forgiveness is never diluted or spread thin. It is all here, and it is all for you. For you He comes and searches, giving His life for yours, and considering that a trade worth making!

For think about that . . . who are we? We are people who are worse, *far worse*, than simply a coin that becomes lost through no fault of its own. We are ones who have left our Saviour willingly, following the sinful desires of our hearts, delighting in our sin. . . . We are people who are worse, *far worse*, than simply sheep who have innocently wandered off, seductively lured away by the promise of a greener pasture. We are ones who have deliberately turned our back on the Good Shepherd, choosing instead to go where we know we should not go; to do what we know we should not do; to speak what we know we should not speak; to think what we know we should not think; to desire what we know we should not desire; to touch what we know we should not touch; to see what we know we should not see. We are the worst of sinners. It is not hard to see.

And so we couldn't blame God for being just a little bit angry! At us ungrateful, sin-worshipping people. . . . And yet where is He? He is here, calling us back to Himself. He is here, surrounding Himself with sinners. He is here, in mercy and forgiveness, giving the fruits of His cross to us who put Him on that cross. He is here, searching us out, and not content to lose a single one. This is a mercy that is too much for us to imagine or grasp. But believe it, for it is true. Your Saviour is here for you, proclaiming your sins forgiven, feeding you with His body and blood, and not letting you go until He blesses you with His nail-scarred hands. He is relentless. His mercy and love will let Him do nothing less.

And we showed that we believe this earlier in the liturgy. As we sang the *Kyrie* – four times we sang “**Lord, have mercy.**” For without His mercy, we are nothing. Without His mercy, we will be destroyed. “**Lord, have mercy**” is the prayer of the sinner who has nothing and must depend and rely on God for everything. . . . Yet we pray this prayer not in uncertain hope, but in confidence, for mercy is who our Saviour is, and what He has promised to give us. And so we know that our prayers are answered, and so immediately after the *Kyrie* we sing a hymn of praise and thanksgiving. That is faith. For although we may not yet have received, or may not be able to see it, we believe. We know that God is faithful.

And then we also show that we believe this in our lives that we live in the world, showing the mercy to others that God has shown to us. To each and every one of us. Individually,

personally, and specially. And here I will close with an example told by Norman Nagel, a professor at our St. Louis seminary, preaching many years ago in London. He said, *“Near us there are many wandering, lost from the Shepherd and the flock. There was one person who recently [said], ‘We have seen people from your church go past on their way to church for years and years, but nobody ever invited us to come.’ When we go after the lost sheep and seek them out, we show Jesus what it means to us that He has sought us out and brought us back to the fold. [And] in doing this we are promised a share in the angels’ joy.”* (Selected Sermons of Norman Nagel, CPH, 169)

I pray that we will never be the church known for that. And I am confident that we will not. For here is a place for sinners, of whom I, and you, and the worst. Here is our Saviour calling to us and to all, in mercy and love. And here we come to repent, and to receive that mercy, the forgiveness of our sins, and faith. Our Saviour, who offered up His life for us, and in our place, on the cross, cannot help Himself. For He rose from the grave in triumph and is still working, and searching, to give that triumph to us. To each one of us. No matter who you are, or how sinful you may be. And wonderful news like that just cannot be kept quiet!

“The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.