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Pentecost 17

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Our Searching, Rejoicing, Forgiving Lord”

Text: Luke 15:1-10; Ezekiel 34:11-24; 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 not only *receives sinners and eats with them*, as *the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled* - He goes looking for them! And not just a little. He searches until He finds them, and finding them rejoices over them. And He doesn't just rejoice privately, or in some small way, but calls together everyone he can think of and holds a party. A party perhaps like He was in when the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling against Him. From outside. For they weren't going in there, with *them*. But Jesus wouldn't be anywhere else.

So to help them - and us - understand His joy, and that we have it with Him, Jesus tells two stories of finding. About a lost sheep and a lost coin. And notice how He begins these stories: *What man, or what woman, doesn't do this?* He asks. Because we do. This is exactly how we act. Now, I haven't gone searching for a lost sheep, but I have gone searching for my dog when he escaped our backyard. We drove, we walked, we called, until we found him. And if I lost a hundred dollar bill, I'll bet I'd search for that for a pretty good amount of time. And the last time I preached on this text, I talked about the time I lost my wedding ring and how I didn't really care about anything else until I found it. And how happy I was when I did. We do those things. The Pharisees and the scribes did those things. Who doesn't, or hasn't, done those things? Jesus asks. So we understand the searching and the joy of finding.

And yet the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling when Jesus was doing the exact same thing. Why? *Because they're sinners*. There's a difference.

The lost coin, the lost ring, not their fault. Even a lost sheep - maybe it just wandered off by accident, or got trapped or stuck somewhere, or was just too dumb. But them. *They're sinners*. It's their fault. They ought to know better. Or maybe they do know better and just don't care; they just keep on sinning anyhow. So why would Jesus rejoice over a bunch like that? Who don't deserve His search, His finding, or His forgiveness.

But maybe that last statement reveals something too - about us. The coin, the ring, the sheep or dog, mean something to us and have value to us. And so we want them back. But perhaps we do not value other people as much. Especially sinners, and especially

those who have sinned *against us*. Maybe we'd respond the same way as the Pharisees and scribes if we saw Jesus in a room filled with abortion doctors, child molesters, and whatever other vile and heinous people you can think of and celebrating with them! *What's He doing? Doesn't He know who they are?* perhaps we would grumble too. So perhaps part of what Jesus is doing here is getting us to take a look at ourselves and ask: do I value my coins and sheep, my ring and dog - my possessions - more than I value my neighbor? And if so, it's not just *them sinners* that need to repent, **but this sinner too**.

And if that's so, **then to realize that we too are in that room** - or at least, Jesus wants us in there with Him. Rejoicing in the love and forgiveness He has for you. For the things of this world are not what Jesus cares about - **it's you**. And it always has been. Since the beginning of time, when Adam and Eve sinned and plunged God's perfect world into sin, ruining it for all time, it was not the world God was concerned for - but them. He came searching for them in the Garden, to find them, forgive them, and promise them a Saviour.

It's a promise He repeated many times, also through the prophet Ezekiel, as we heard today. ***Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out***, He says. For just as in Jesus' day, with the Pharisees and scribes caring more about their coins and sheep than the people, the priests and leaders in the Old Testament had often done the same thing - trampling the people and pushing them aside and caring only for themselves and what they could get. So God said, I will send them a shepherd, ***My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd. A good one.***

And when I put it that way, you know He's not really talking about David, as in King David, who lived and died many hundreds of years before Ezekiel - but of the Son of David, the son promised to David, who would sit on David's throne forever. *Of Jesus*. And what Ezekiel prophesied, *the Pharisees and scribes were witnessing*. God Himself had come to search for and find His sheep. And rejoiced when He found them, even the ones who had wandered time after time. Even the ones who had wandered for a long time, and the ones who had wandered a long way away. Maybe especially them. The greater the lostness, the greater the joy of finding.

And so Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, came and searched and called. Lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, foreigners, no one too lost; no one beyond His love. Even someone like Saul the great persecutor of the church. He wrote that to Timothy, about how lost he was, but then this too: ***Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost***. And if for the foremost sinner, then for all the other sinners, too. Then for you and me.

For still God is searching and calling out. Though Jesus is ascended into heaven, still His Spirit is working through the Word that is proclaimed - proclaimed here, and proclaimed out there by you - to reach the hearts of those who hear. *Who* speaks it matters not, but

that all hear of the love and forgiveness of Jesus. I have been given to speak it here, you have been given to speak it to your family, friends, and neighbors, but the same Spirit is working through that Word that all might be saved and none lost anymore.

For Jesus didn't just come to eat with tax collectors and sinners, but to die for them. For just as He took the guilt of all their sins and ours upon Himself to atone for them on the cross, so also He took all their *lostness* and ours upon Himself. In fact, so lost did He become that He was completely separated from His Father on the cross, even crying out like a lost lamb, *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?* The Son become the sinner. The searcher become the lost. But so that sinners become sons and the lost be found. Not to continue to sin, but to be set free from sin - both its curse and its dominion.

And so it is. From Adam and Eve in the Garden, to you here at the Font. From the folks in Ezekiel's day, to you here at the Pulpit. From the tax collectors and sinners in Jesus' day, to you here at the Altar. Jesus is calling and forgiving, you. Not holding your lostness and sins against you, even if you've come here today and repented of the same sin you fell into again this week for the umpteenth time. He and His angels are rejoicing that you are here, found, washed with His forgiveness and fed with His Body and Blood.

But there is another story of searching that needs to be mentioned here today, and that is the searching that began this day, 15 years ago: on September 11, 2001. When Tower 1 and then Tower 2 fell, as well as part of the Pentagon, a frantic search began - first for survivors, then, after a while, for the lost. It was a difficult and often gruesome job. I spoke to many of the workmen at the pile of rubble in New York when they were on their breaks. They were working 12, 15 hour days. And though they didn't want to be there, they also didn't want to stop - not until the last body, the last of the lost, was found. But sadly, they never found them all. For some, there was nothing to find.

On that site today is a memorial. There are two large holes in the ground, and in the center of those holes another hole, black, that you cannot see the bottom of. It's like looking into a sepulchre. A grave. For those never found.

But the sepulchre that we look into is far different than that. For the One who wasn't found there when the women came to look for Him isn't missing or dead, but risen and alive. And He who spent six hours on the cross and three days in the grave, under the rubble of our sin and death which crushed Him, knows where the body of each and every person is. So that on the Last Day, when He comes again, the next great feast will begin. That just as the dead are raised here and now - no matter how or how badly sin has ravaged us, so the dead will be raised then - no matter how or how badly death has ravaged our bodies. And just as the flock of David rejoices to eat and drink with our Saviour here and now - so the flock of David will rejoice to eat and drink with our Saviour at the feast which has no end. ***Our mourning will be turned into dancing, and***

*we will give thanks to the Lord forever* (Introit).

To the Lord, who redeemed us.

To the Lord, who searches for each one as if you're the only one.

To the Lord, *who sinners doth receive* (LSB #609).

To the Lord, in whom we rejoice, and who rejoices over you.

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.