

**St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA**  
**The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge**  
**Church Year C**  
**9/11/2016**  
**Pentecost 17**  
**Luke 15:1-10**

Welcome to Kick-Off-Sunday.

This first Sunday of our program year here at St. Thomas is traditionally observed on the Sunday after Labor Day because vacations are over, school has begun, and folks are back to work, albeit in a bleary-eyed kind of way. It's a day when we also celebrate the return of lots of our brothers and sisters who have been away from the community for all sorts of reasons over the summer. In fact, in some churches this is called Homecoming Sunday. I like that. I hope that all of us feel that St. Thomas is our spiritual home and that however far we may travel or wander, this home is always waiting for us.

So how interesting that we come to three parables this morning about wandering and returning, about losing and finding. Now, you may be saying to yourself, "Wait a minute. I was paying attention and I only heard two parables being read, Where's the third one?"

Well, the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke finds Jesus telling three parables to his friends, and the religious authorities, who were grumbling that he had invited tax collectors, sinners, and other outcasts to dinner with him. So, good teacher that he is, instead of lecturing them, or pointing the finger at them, he tells them stories. Three of them. The Parable of the Lost Sheep, and the Parable of the Lost Coin, which we read a minute ago. And right after those, which our lectionary doesn't include today, is the very familiar Parable of the Prodigal Son. And all of these parables are certainly about how God values what seems to be lost, about how God relentlessly reaches out to find and recover what has been lost.

Now if you're anything like me, you've been lost a time or two in your life, and not just when driving from Point A to Point B. I mean "lost" as in, I'm looking for home and can't find my way back. Like that lost sheep Jesus was talking about. And I hope you know the joy, the relief, when you find home or home finds you once again. It's the relief, really, of allowing ourselves to be found by God, the relentless God who never forgets us, who never loses us, even though we too often try to hide ourselves away from God.

That's certainly what these three stories are about, and there's also something else going on here that I'd like to spend a minute or so on. Think about Jesus' audience for these stories. The religious authorities, the men who are righteous, the ones who do no

wrong, at least as far as they're concerned, the ones, that is to say, who have earned God's favor, so they believe. Keep that word "earned" in mind. So these righteous religious authorities are just scandalized when they find Jesus sharing table fellowship with those who had broken moral laws and who had broken ritual codes of purity. I don't know about you, but I've fallen off the straight and narrow a time or two in my life and maybe not strictly observed all the ritual purity codes our culture lays down for us, and I've been on the wrong end of some pretty serious finger-wagging by some pretty self-assured folks. It's not fun. It can, in fact, be shaming. The irony here is that the "grumbling" of the religious authorities is meant to remind us of the grumbling of the people of Israel in the wilderness when they were unhappy with Moses' leadership and, really, with God. Yet even in the face of all their grumbling and acting out, God showed mercy. So fast-forward about 1200 years to Jesus being the object of grumbling because he is showing mercy to someone besides the religious authorities, who, after all, thought they had earned God's favor. And those "others", those sinners, had not.

So they must have been puzzled, and probably offended, by the first parable which Jesus pointedly concludes by saying "...there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent." What? Clearly, Jesus is pointing to them in all their self-righteousness, in all their arrogant certainty that they are right and those "others," those sinners are wrong.

In the second parable, "the righteous persons who need no repentance" have disappeared. They seem to have lost their place, in fact. The focus isn't on the transactional nature of repentance, which can sometimes be mistaken for earning God's favor. Instead, the focus is on celebration, God's joy over the ones who respond to God's mercy. And rejoicing calls for celebration. The parable invites the righteous to join the celebration, and to give thanks for God's mercy instead of calculating who's earned what.

Finally, just a brief word about the parable we didn't read, but which is so important to Jesus' point. Recall the older brother, who is pretty unhappy that his father is celebrating the return of his worthless little brother who's gone off and blown his inheritance on wine, women and song. "I've been a good and dutiful son," he says, self-righteously, to his father. "I've followed all the rules, and you've never thrown a party for me." His father tenderly replies, "My son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours. But we have to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life, he was lost and has been found."

I've heard it said that we too often we want mercy for ourselves and justice for others. I hate to confess that this is a thought not unknown to me. There have been plenty of times I have been secretly thankful that God doesn't give me what I deserve, while at the same time, looking at those "others" and hoping they get what I think they deserve.

And I'll bet I'm not the only one. But Jesus tells these parables to call us to celebrate with God because God has been merciful not only to us but to the "others", those sinners, the ones we wouldn't have invited to sit around our table.

This is such an important word for us in these anxious, divisive times. Jesus has prepared the table for all of us, and he invites all of us to the feast. Too often, we think of ourselves as being the 99, the righteous who need no repentance. And we secretly wonder why God wastes his time on searching for that "other" sheep; you know, the sheep that doesn't agree with me. But I'm here to tell you that we aren't complete, we aren't whole, without the very ones we don't approve of. We are only 99. If we live in the self-satisfaction of believing our own press releases, believing that we alone are right and righteous and beloved by God, we may be surprised to find that God is off somewhere else looking for that one lost sheep, that sinful sheep, that sheep that doesn't agree with me. Here's an irony for you. It seems that God is the God of the 1%. And we, the 99, aren't complete without that 1%. We need each other. Even the ones we don't agree with.

The truth of the matter is that at various times in our lives we have each one of us been that lost sheep, lost and longing to be found by God. And we have also been among the 99. Certain that we are favored. Certain that we have it all figured out. Certain that we are right. Thank God that God has mercy on us both when we're lost and even when we think we're not. And calls us all home.

So on this day, welcome home to all of us. God has called us home today right here at St. Thomas. In worship, in study, in prayer, and in service this is one place where we'll find our true home. A place where we might know God's acceptance, and God's mercy. And we don't have to earn it. We just have to embrace it. We just have to fall into it. We just have to show up. We just have to jump in and participate.

So welcome to a new program year. Welcome home to St. Thomas. Let's get this party started!