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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
9/11/2016, The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost,
Lectionary 24
Exodus 32:7-14, Luke 15:1-10

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text refers to a matter about which you and I, who are not yet sinless, could well rejoice, but it is a matter about which the Pharisees and the scribes in this morning's Gospel Lesson complain:

And the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying,
"This man receives *sinners* and eats with them." (Luke
15:2, RSV)

There is some justice here on the side of the Pharisees and scribes. There is some Biblical warrant for their position. In fact, just last Sunday we read an important text supporting their uneasiness with Jesus mingling with the sinners. I mean Psalm 1. Listen to the first verse again:

¹Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers; (Psalm 1:1, RSV)

Too much walking, too much standing, too much sitting with the sinners! That is what some of the best people in Israel thought about Jesus.

It was that same impulse that led a Pharisee named Simon to dismiss Jesus when the woman washed the feet of Jesus with her tears, and kissed his feet and wiped them with her hair. Simon beheld this tenderness and concluded that it disproved Jesus as being a holy man:

Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." (Luke 7:39, RSV)

This story of Simon the Pharisee and the woman who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears is told in the Gospel According to St. Luke – same as this morning's story about the straying sheep. Luke seems especially to treasure this trait in Jesus: Jesus seeks sinners — all of them! He loves them and wants to draw them near. He does not want them to continue in their sin, but nor

does he want to abandon them. His heart is too much filled with love and with mercy and with readiness to forgive. And so it is that our Lord Jesus is a seeker of the lost. The Pharisees and scribes in this morning's story are right about Jesus. They have measured the man correctly: Jesus "receives sinners and eats with them."

That disagreeable man you noticed on the subway: he cannot be so disagreeable that Jesus does not want him back. That tattooed, pierced teenager who was so rude: that young person cannot be so extraordinary that Jesus does not want that young one to come walk with him. Jesus seeks sinners. It is one of this world's most glorious thoughts! The one in charge of everything seeks sinners. He wants you and me. Jesus cannot rest content with people wandering away from him, for departing from him can only mean suffering in the end.

So, in this morning's story, the shepherd goes out after the one sheep that has strayed. He could have stayed home in the comfort of his cottage. He could have chalked up that one lost sheep as a reasonable business expense. Only his heart will not permit such a thing. So, he puts on his jacket, grabs his staff, says goodbye to Mrs. Shepherd, and off he goes after that one straying sheep.

The poor thing is rather helpless. Sheep seem to have no sense of direction. They seem unable to smell water, for example, and head there. If they did, that would make finding them easier. If you could get inside the mind of a sheep, maybe you could figure out where he has gone. But there seems to be no getting inside the head of sheep. They wander aimlessly.

And while they are wandering, they are vulnerable. They are pretty much defenseless. The sheep has no fangs, no claws, no horns, cannot camouflage himself – he just sticks out there on the landscape like a sore thumb, like a woolly ball. The sheep is in danger while straying from the shepherd. We are all in danger while straying from Jesus.

Now, notice what happens when this shepherd finds the lost sheep. He does not scold that sheep. He does not lecture the sheep. He does not drive that sheep with his staff, complaining under his breath about the time and effort this all has cost him. He does not even calmly lead the sheep back home. Instead, he lifts up that sheep and carries that sheep on his shoulders. Such tenderness!

In some sense, this story is a revelation of the heart of many a shepherd, many a dairy farmer. You and I look on and see a herd of creatures, all of whom look pretty much the same to us. But the farmer and the shepherd often know the individual creature, one by one. An orchard farmer might even know each tree in the orchard, one by one. It is with a good shepherd as St. John says:

...he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep.
To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice,
and he calls *his own sheep by name* and leads them out.
(John 10:2-3, RSV)

So, the shepherd in this story might have known and loved this particular sheep, as he loved all the sheep in his flock. As he was putting on his jacket to go out searching, he might have said to himself, "Billy there is not very smart. But he's *my* sheep and I mean to find him!"

The story, then, gives us a peek into the life of a good shepherd or farmer. They care about each of their creatures.

But the story is even more important as a revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. He associates with sinners! If the Pharisees and the scribes murmur that he receives sinners and eats with them, Jesus can only plead guilty. But what else can he do? His heart cannot give up on the sinner. He cannot signal to them in a hundred different ways that he would be just as glad if they would go away. The gap between his holiness and the shabbiness of sinners is infinite, but the physical distance between them does not exist. Jesus really does receive sinners and eat with them. We will soon see that for ourselves, right at the Holy Communion. Jesus is the One in this world who always leans toward the sick, including the soul-sick:

... he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:12-13, RSV)

And what a sweet thing Jesus reveals to us about heaven and the angels:

⁷Just 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. (Luke 15:7, RSV)

We could imagine heaven rejoicing over many things. "Look at Michelangelo," we could imagine one angel saying to another. "See what he is sculpting today." Or, "Did you notice what Bach is up to these days? It is magnificent!" Or, "Did you see the autumn sunset in New England, with all those beautiful fall colors in the trees?" Yes, there is much beauty in God's creation that heaven could rejoice over. But judging by Jesus, it turns out that the most beautiful sight of all in the eyes of heaven is a sinner turning life around and heading toward Jesus.

And so it is that if you or I should be sinners, that does not disqualify us from Jesus. "Everyone is a sinner," we might say to ourselves, thereby

claiming our unity with the whole human race. But sometimes the words, “I am sinner,” are not said so casually. They are not said to claim unity with humanity, but rather to confess some great wrong that we have done. Maybe we are overestimating the horror of what we have done. But maybe we are being dead-on accurate. Maybe we are conscious that we have indeed done something dreadful in life. Maybe the humble words of St. Paul from this morning’s Epistle Lesson seem absolutely right for us too:

²⁵The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am *the foremost of sinners*; (1 Timothy 1:15, RSV)

If this should be so for you or for me... if it should be literally so that our sins have been so bad that we are “foremost of sinners,” then let us smile a bit to ourselves and think this way, “If I be the chief of sinners, that means Jesus wants me back. He seeks me. He will carry me on his shoulders. No! Even more: he will carry that old rugged cross on his shoulders, that I might live!”

However bad or weak or failing we have been in the past, let us give heaven something to rejoice over this morning. Let the applause begin this morning in heaven over us! Let us boldly turn toward Christ. If we are already inclined toward him, let us turn to him with even more earnestness. Though our sins be as scarlet, let us seek the Good Shepherd who is also seeking us, even Jesus Christ our Lord

Now, let me end with a few words about September 11, 2001 — fifteen years ago today. One of my strongest memories from those days was the morning afterwards. Our church was open for prayer. One of the young men sitting in the back of the church turned out to be a physician from nearby Lenox Hill Hospital. He said that when news of the attack came, he and his colleagues rushed to the hospital to be ready to treat the injured. But the night wore on, and no one came. And bit by bit, the meaning of that dawned on them: there were no injured people to treat. The people in that tower had died. This young doctor was worn out and discouraged.

What I say to you now I mean also to say at tomorrow’s funeral for Reuben Figueroa — Ester Neubacher’s brother. When we humans reach the end of our strength... when the physician can do no more... when it seems that sin and horror have triumphed, there still remains hope in this world, because the Good Shepherd lives in this world! He can seek us out, even if we have fallen into death. He can search until he finds us, and then he can lift us up onto his shoulders and carry us home, even into his everlasting kingdom. And to this Good Shepherd be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.