

A Shepherd's Heart

**Second in a Series of Four - "A Heart From God / A Heart For Others
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost / September 10, 11, 2022**

Ezekiel 34 - I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak

Luke 15: What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.

Dear Friends in Christ

I would not be stretching the truth to say that my dad was a shepherd boy. He grew up on the prairies of North Dakota, and along with a couple of his brothers, a sheep dog, and a pony, they would take the family flock out to pasture. They would watch over the birthing process, they would make sure their little flock didn't wander into the neighbor's grain fields, they would make sure they had something to eat and drink and were not scattered when storms would strike.

My dad was a man of few words. He wasn't much of a story teller. His dad lost the family farm in 1939, and they started over. Later in life, I was trying to get my dad to talk about his shepherd boy days. I asked him if he grew fond of the sheep. He answered, "No. I hated them. They were stupid." Pretty much the end of the story."

At first glance, my dad didn't have much of a shepherd's heart. As far as I know he didn't give them names, he didn't sleep and cuddle with them, he didn't cry when they slaughtered and ate them. But on the other hand, he did make sure they were fed, watered, protected, and gathered safely into the pen at night. In fact, his one desire was to do his father's will, which was to faithfully watch over the family flock. In fact, you could make a case that he did have the heart of a shepherd boy.

Our sermon series in September is focused on the Mission Statement of Faith Lutheran, "A Heart From God / A Heart For People." Last week, our theme was "A Disciple's Heart," as we explored the importance of making hard choices, the necessity of carrying our assigned crosses, and what it means to be renouncing our

possessions as we follow Christ. Next Sunday, our theme will be “A Steward’s Heart.” The Sunday after that, “A Rich Man’s Heart.”

Today, “A Shepherd’s Heart.” Two qualities we learn about a Good Shepherd’s heart from our appointed lessons for today

First, the heart of a good shepherd aches for and goes looking for the lost

Secondly, the heart of a good shepherd rejoices in and cares for the found

First, the heart of a good shepherd aches for and goes looking for the lost

According to a “Lost and Found Survey” by Pixie, the average American spends 2.5 days a year looking for misplaced items. The item we lose most often is the TV remote, which 71% of lose at least once a month. Items next on the list which we lose most often are phones, keys, glasses, and shoes. Collectively, we spend 2.7 billion dollars each year replacing lost items, and more than half of us are regularly late for work or school due to frustrating searches.

Searching for that which matters to us until we find it is the natural thing to do. Years ago, our son couldn’t find his wedding ring at the end of his own wedding reception. After a long and wonderful night of eating and drinking and being merry, we did what good friends and family do - we retraced steps, we searched high and low, we looked everywhere possible, our hearts ached and worried and would not rest until the lost was found.

A few years after that, one of our grandsons went missing on the family farm. It was late summer, the corn was tall, the calls for help went out, and the neighbors and grandparents and rescue squad people in small towns do what neighbors and grandparents and rescue squad people in small towns do - we looked in every nook and corner, we started to peek into the corn fields, our hearts ached and worried and would not rest until a grandma found him napping under a mound of laundry.

The hearts of good parents and good grandparents and good neighbors and good rescue people and good bridal parties and good shepherds ache for and go looking for the lost until they find it. That’s why Jesus came from heaven above to earth below - to seek out and save lost sinners. To be that obedient Son with the one simple desire to do His Father’s will. To be that shepherd predicted by Ezekiel - the one who would seek out his sheep, he would rescue them from all places where they have been scattered, he would feed them on the mountains of Israel with good

pasture, He would make them lie down in green pastures, he would lead them beside still waters, he would bring back the strays, he would bind up the injured, he would strengthen the weak, he would make sure there were little congregations established all over the world, with under shepherds who would watch over and care for souls in His name.

The context of Luke 15 is that the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling that Jesus was welcoming the open sinners of His day and enjoying table fellowship with them. Jesus was rubbing elbows with the adulterers, the drunkards, the gluttons, the tax collectors, the lepers, and the ceremonially unclean.

With these three parables, Jesus is calling on the carpet Pharisees in every generation for pride, for a self-righteous refusal to see the kingdom for what it truly is - the forgiveness of sins. The Pharisees saw in people what they had done wrong, Jesus saw in them what the Holy Spirit could do. To the casual observer, the early disciples looked to be bad-tempered, foul-mouthed sailors on the Sea of Galilee, but Jesus could see them to be men with a great destiny in the work of the kingdom. Nicodemus was to Jesus not a piece of the corrupt establishment, but a man ripe for rebirth in the Kingdom. The woman taken in adultery was not just one more case of the shocking decline of morals, but a person capable of responding to the love of God which would not use her but renew her. These tax collectors and sinners who flocked to hear Jesus were not only cheats and extortioners, they were children whom the Father sought as a faithful shepherd.

Jesus did not stereotype people. He was not content to accept the labels put upon others as the only truth or the full and final truth about them.

The kingdom of God is like a grandma whose heart doesn't just ache for her grandchildren who have turned their back on the church and decided that religion is for old people, she keeps on acting upon her ache. She doesn't just pray for God's Spirit to intervene, she writes them a letter once a week, she shows interest in their lives, she tells them again and again how good God has been to her. She doesn't just hope for the best, she stays connected, she looks for opportunities to let her Gospel light shine, that others may see her good works and give glory to God.

Secondly, the heart of a good shepherd rejoices in and cares for the found

There's an old Swedish proverb that declares, "Shared joy is double joy. Shared sorrow is half sorrow."

That proverb is certainly supported in Luke 15.

In the first parable, the shepherd finds the lost sheep. He places it upon his shoulder, rejoicing. When he has come home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and invites them to rejoice with him. And Jesus explains that in the same way there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous who have no need of repentance.

In the second parable, the woman finds her lost coin. She calls together her friends and neighbors and invites them to rejoice with her. And again Jesus explains, in the same way, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

And in the third parable, when the prodigal son returns, the father insists that the fattened calf be sacrificed, that the entire community eat and drink and be merry, that there be much rejoicing, for his son was lost and has been found

A story is told about a grandpa who was out walking with his grandson, Billy. After a while, Grandpa asked, "How far do you think we are from home, Billy?" "I don't know." Grandpa then asked, "Do you know where you are?" Billy answered, "I don't know that, either." With a twinkle in his eye, Grandpa replied, "Sounds to me as if you're lost." To which Billy looked up and said, "No, Grandpa, I can't be lost. I'm with you."

In this sanctuary, we can never be lost. Jesus Christ is with us. In the reading and the preaching of His Word He draws near. In the words of absolution He holds us close. In the bread and the wine of His Supper, He is present, really. Again and again, in Word and in Sacrament, the Holy Spirit calls and He gathers us into a celebration, and even as we celebrate, He enlightens us with His gifts, He trains us for holy living, and He sanctifies us with His truths. His Word is truth. Praise be to God.

Families don't just celebrate good times, they care for each other in between celebrations. That's the second quality we want to note about pastors and congregations as we live through the ups and downs of life together. The high point of our congregational life is Divine Service, and specifically Holy Communion, where we celebrate with the angels and the archangels and the entire company of heaven. If there is joy in the presence of the angels when a single

sinner repents, imagine the joy in heaven when 30 or 60 or 90 of us throw ourselves on the mercy of God in this very sanctuary this very weekend.

Many of you are old enough to remember a campaign by Campus Crusade in the 1970's called "I Found It." Christian evangelists by the thousands went door to door inviting people to find Jesus, and by God's grace, many apparently did come to faith.

Lutheran theologians, of course, twitched early and often. We twitched early and often because of the parables we are studying this very day - where we are the lost sheep and Jesus is finding us, not the other way around.

This morning, we would be reminded one more time that the local congregation is not some sort of a country club where the good and successful people go, it's more like a hospital where the hurting and broken sinners go. It's not only a sanctuary where we celebrate the unconditional love of our God, it's a mission outpost, where we receive our training for the opportunities laid out before us. It's not only a rest area where we can be still and know that God is God, it's a refueling station where the Holy Spirit intends to enlighten and inspire.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers full of folks who have their lazy days, their good days, and their ambitious days.

On their lazy days, they are turned in on themselves, they just sort of coast through their routines, and they mind their own business. Their prayer life is shallow, their hearts are distracted by earthly matters.

On their good days, they confess their faults to God and to one another, the forgiveness of God sweeps over their souls, their pastors teach them the truths of God faithfully, they are blessed beyond measure as they hear that Word and hold it close to their hearts. Their singular desire is to do their Father's will.

On their ambitious days, they go looking for broken hearts that need a listening ear, they wonder which of their neighbors most of all needs their love, and they have this ache in their hearts for those who are living and dying apart from Christ - an ache that won't go away. In Jesus' Name. Amen.