

## Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 15, 2019

### Said Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year C, Proper 19: Exodus 32:1, 7-14; Psalm 51:1-11; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10*

I want to begin with words from the end of last Sunday's gospel. Jesus was teaching "the great multitudes"<sup>1</sup> who were following him. As his teaching approaches its conclusion he says, "Whoever ... does not renounce all that he or she has cannot be my disciple."<sup>2</sup> Who continues to follow him? "Tax collectors and sinners,"<sup>3</sup> along with Pharisees and scribes, whom Luke the evangelist sees as Jesus' enemies—not only in this gospel but also in Luke's second book, *The Acts of the Apostles*.<sup>4</sup> Jesus continues to reach out to all of them, persons separated from God in one way or another.<sup>5</sup> Then follow three parables about the lost and the found, a lost sheep, a lost coin, and lost sons. This last parable, commonly called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, you

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 14:25.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 14:33. The Greek here is inclusive.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 15:1.

<sup>4</sup> François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, trans. Donald S. Deer, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 403–04.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* Bovon describes tax collectors and sinners this way; I think it also applies to Pharisees and scribes.

may recall, is really about two sons, one who finds his way home and one who is angry at his father for celebrating his brother's return.

[Brief rant: We really should be hearing all of this chapter on one Sunday. It's one story, not three different stories.]

This is how the parable ends: *Now his elder son was in the field . . . heard music and dancing . . . “Your brother has come . . . your father has killed the fatted calf” . . . But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out . . . [to] him, but he answered . . . “these many years I have served you . . . I never disobeyed your command . . . you never gave me a kid . . . [to] make merry with my friends . . . But when this son . . . came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!” . . . The father said,] “Son, you are always with me . . . all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”<sup>6</sup>*

Luke leaves the story there for the tax collectors, the sinners, the Pharisees, and the scribes, to make a choice, just as you and I have a choice, about loving

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 16:25–32.

and following God's will for our lives, about being not lost, but found by God.

In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd—Montessori religious formation for children—this third story is known as the parable of the forgiving father. If memory serves, it is first presented to children six- to nine-year olds—as their biological capacity for what we call moral formation—conscience—is just beginning to develop in a new way. The parable of the lost sheep is presented to three- to six-year olds. In the presentation, the children are invited to wonder about who the lost sheep is. To a three-year old a sheep is a sheep. This religious formation program came to be called the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd because its founders observed the profound spiritual joy that a five- or six-year old experiences when he or she realizes that he or she is one of the Shepherd's sheep.

I think it's fair to say that, when an adult person is really meeting the Lord Jesus in his or her soul for the first time, the range of response, spiritual and physical, will be profound and also unique to that person. No two people, even so-called identical twins, are the same.

There's a lot of material in today's parables. Luke invites us to wonder how we are lost and found in our lives today. I have no knowledge or experience of shepherding sheep. But I do know what it is like to be lost in my own life and have heard about the experiences of others. A lost sheep can be hungry, thirsty, and exhausted. A lost person can be confused, depressed and very afraid. But when the Shepherd finds one who is lost, the Shepherd does not punish; the Shepherd carries the one who is found home.

The finding of the lost coin is next. Note that this story is about a woman and her friends. Women are very much a part of the Christian community known by Luke, not to mention John and Paul. The parable of the lost sheep speaks to the rural reality and the lost coin to urban reality.<sup>7</sup> Then the parable of the lost sons or forgiving father takes brings the invitation to be forgiven, to be forgive, to be thankful, and to eat with others.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Bovon, 413.