

**Ps 32; Joshua 5:9-12; 2 Cor 5: 16-21;
Lu 15:1-3, 11b-32**

We continue toward Jerusalem. Three weeks down and three weeks to go until we experience Christ's victory over darkness and death on Easter Morning.

We haven't really noticed, but the Pharisees, the scribes and the teachers of the law have been with us the whole time, in the crowds. They always criticize Jesus for the company He keeps, that He heals on the Sabbath – and that He eats with tax collectors and sinners. This is the accusation that sparks Jesus' parables in Luke 15. No observant Jew eats with Gentiles or known sinners or persons of poor reputation. But, Jesus, the beloved preacher, teacher and healer, does all of it. He models an entirely new way of being in community. Scandalous.

Jesus begins to teach about our heavenly Father's love for the lost. First, the famous picture of the compassionate shepherd who finds one of his one hundred sheep missing. He leaves the ninety-nine in the fold and goes to find his one lost sheep. He comes back with the lamb on his shoulders, shouting joyfully, "Rejoice with me,

because I have found my lost sheep!” When there is rejoicing, there will be food and drink. The shepherd invites all his friends and neighbors to a celebration meal. This compassionate care is just like our heavenly Father. He delights to rescue and deliver the lost. Jesus is telling the Pharisees, “I sit down to feast a lot because I am celebrating. So many are coming to faith in Me and My Father. You stick-in-the-muds see how the angels are dancing and singing. Lighten up and join in.”

These church leaders grumble and mutter under their breath. They remind me of the children of Israel out in the Sinai desert. Always complaining about something.

Then, Jesus paints a portrait of the woman who has ten silver coins. She loses one, so she lights a lamp and begins to search carefully to find it. When she discovers the missing coin, she calls all her friends and says, “Rejoice with me, because I have found the silver coin I lost!” They all come over to her freshly swept house for snacks and drinks to celebrate. Unseen and unheard by the church leaders, the angels of heaven sing and

rejoice that the lost coin is found. God delights when what was lost is found. It is the beginning of something new. Everything old has passed away, says the Apostle Paul. There is joy in heaven over what has been restored to God's household.

Finally, Jesus tells the story of the man with two sons. Recall the story of the sheep – that was 1% of the whole – lost and then found. As for the coin, that was 10% missing – then restored. Now, we will look at a 50% loss. This story is not so simple. This is about a father and his children.

The younger son is not content down on the farm. No, this kid wants Dad to liquidate some of the estate and let him cash out before the time he would inherit his portion – upon his father's death. He's asking for a lot. He is also saying, "Let's make like you have already died, Father, so I can have a big bundle of cash." It is insulting and disrespectful. The hearers of the story in the 1st c would certainly know that this is an ungrateful son.

So, the son takes his portion and runs away to the 1st c equivalent of Las Vegas or Rio de Janeiro.

He proceeds to squander the whole inheritance on riotous living. Soon, he is broke. About that time, famine strikes in the land and he must hire himself out just to stay alive. He hires on to tend the pigs with no hope of saving up to replace what he has wasted. How humiliating for a Hebrew boy. He is hungry. He begins to eye the pods that the farmer feeds the pigs. He can eat, but no one gives him anything. He will remain poor, without pay beyond what he can eat.

The Bible says with that realization he “comes to himself.” He wakes up – how foolish he has been and what a mess he has made of his life! He remembers life on his father’s land. That is where he belongs. He expects his dad will be so put out with him he’d never take him back. So, he rehearses a forgiveness plea and he starts out for home. He plans to offer himself as a laborer on his dad’s place. Perhaps he will be able to earn back what he has thrown away. He knows he has wronged his dad – ruined the family name. He will show his dad that he’s worth something.

He is still thinking in worldly terms – with worldly values. He wants to prove he can be trusted.

He's willing to work for it. He cannot imagine anything new – anything pure or divine such as unconditional love and forgiveness.

This is about the super-abundant grace of the father. The father has watched for his boy down that road. And suddenly, there he is in the distance. Dad knows his walk – knows his shape! Christ watches for you and me just so.

The Father doesn't stand there silent and stoic, ready to judge what His son will say and do. No, he lifts up his robe to his knees and runs out to meet His son. He throws his arms around him and covers him with kisses. The son can't get a word out. Finally, when he can speak, he begins his speech. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight..." But the Father orders the best robe, a ring for his finger, sandals for his feet. He isn't moved by the humble speech his son has prepared. He is overjoyed that his boy has returned to Him. He says, "Fire up the big barbecue and bring the fattened calf! We're having a great celebration. My boy was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

The older son comes running to confirm that his pain-in-the-neck brother is home. He is furious. Jesus has saved His message for the self-righteous 'til last. The Pharisees get a high definition picture of themselves. They won't even come in and rejoice with the family of God. They have chosen to stand apart and call their fellow sinner unclean. Gentile, tax collector, prostitute! God in Christ deeply desires to gather us all, cleanse us and sit down to a feast with us.

This grace of the New Covenant in Christ's blood is freely given. You can't earn it. It doesn't matter how greedy and wicked you and I have been. Today there is newness of life! Today, the fourth Sunday in Lent, is the day to turn toward home as a child of the Most High God.

"You say, 'But I have sinned.' So you have, but sin cannot cut you off from Christ's love. He still loves you. Do not think that the scars of your old sins have ruined your beauty or that He loves you less because of that blemish. He loved you when He foreknew your sin, and He does not love you any less now. Come to Him boldly in faith, and tell Him that you are sorry that you grieved Him.

He will forget your wandering and will welcome you in. His kisses of love will be bestowed on you, and the arms of His grace will embrace you. He is faithful, so trust Him. He will never deceive you. He will never leave you.” (Charles Spurgeon, *Holy Spirit Power*, Whitaker House, 1996, p 15)

In Him you and I are a new creation.

Amen.