

Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

⁸ “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (Luke 15:1-10)

What is the True Measure of Love?

A father I know once told me the story of the birth of one his children. She was born very early with serious medical problems. She spent months in the NICU and had multiple procedures. At the time, he and his wife had very limited health insurance, so they had to agree to a payment plan for all that stuff. They will spend the rest of their lives making payments on it. Yet, he said, when it was all going on, you didn’t even ask how much it was going to cost. The doctors said your daughter needed this and you just told them to go ahead. Now he didn’t say why they agreed to that. But he didn’t have to. He and his wife loved that little girl and they were prepared to take on whatever debt was necessary to save her life. And while I’m sure they don’t like being saddled with a lifetime of payments, she is worth every penny to them. That conversation has stuck with me for over a decade because he was just so matter-of-fact about it. What a testament to his love! In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus gives us several indications of his love and it leads me to ask a question: **What is the true measure of love?**

I.

Is it joy? Jesus tells a parable about a shepherd who has a hundred sheep grazing in a pasture and one goes missing. Sheep were very valuable animals and shepherds would count their flocks regularly to make sure they had them all. So he doesn’t even hesitate; the shepherd goes and looks for that missing sheep. When at last he finds it, he throws that sheep up onto his shoulders and he joyfully carries it back to the flock. Then when the day is over and the whole flock is safely back in its pen, Jesus says, **“Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’”**

Rejoice with me! Don’t we want to tell people when good news comes? When we’re expecting a child or when our kids are getting married? To this shepherd, recovering that lost sheep was just as joyful a moment. Now, whose joy are we talking about? Jesus said, **“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”** We often use this verse as an incentive for us to reach out to the straying in our congregations – to those who don’t come to church anymore or who are caught in sin and need to repent. And that is an appropriate use. But this passage is about God’s joy, not ours. The shepherd is Jesus himself. Jesus goes looking for that last sheep and Jesus carries it back to the flock and Jesus calls his friends and neighbors together because he found that dumb sheep that wandered off and put its own life in danger. That’s Jesus’ joy at finding us.

Why do we need to be found? Sin. It’s just so easy for us to get caught up in the pleasures and the worries and the distractions of this life. Jesus is talking about us those times when our choices and our lifestyles lead us away from everything that we’ve been taught and plant us on the road to hell. But he comes and he strikes us with terror over that prospect. And we repent. We confess our sins. We ask our Savior to forgive us. And what is his response? Joy. There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the 99 who did not need to repent. Jesus is just glad we’re back. And you know what strikes me about that? He doesn’t shed any tears over the sins that led us away. He doesn’t wallow in his hurt and his disappointment that we of all people should be guilty of such sinful behavior. He doesn’t do what we so often do – what I have done and

what I have heard other parents and pastors and teachers do: he doesn't keep reminding us that we were so bad. He just rejoices that we're back. That is the measure of God's love for us.

II.

That joy is evident in both of the little stories Jesus told. But so is another evidence of God's love: how hard he works to recover us. **So what is the true measure of love? Is it effort?** Effort is easy to miss. When we were children, we didn't always appreciate the fact that every day our parents went to work and spent hours slaving away just so that they could come home and spend the vast majority of the money they made on us kids. We didn't always appreciate that they spent the best years of their lives working inside and outside the home for us. That effort showed how much they loved us. Well, Jesus points to the effort behind love in his two parables this morning.

He makes a bigger deal of it in the second parable. A woman has ten silver coins. The Greek word is *drachma*, a coin worth that was often used to pay a day's wage. It was a significant amount of money. And the woman has ten. That's her life's savings. But she loses one of those coins. What does she do? Jesus says, **"Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?"** Jewish homes were not particular well lit. Windows were small. Can't you just see this poor woman lighting a lamp and starting at one end of the house and working her way through to other, sweeping the dirt floor, hoping that that coin has just been covered by dirt or straw and it will pop up? The farther she gets into the house, the more frantically she works because she hasn't found it yet and she fears she might not. Then, when she does, she rejoices and shares that good news with her friends.

Again, this is about God's love and his effort. It is true that these parables provide an excellent model of what our love should be like, but Jesus' focus is on God. He told these stories because the Pharisees and the teachers of the law were offended by the company he kept. He associated with tax collectors and sinners. And understand, those people really were guilty of serious sins. Jesus was not in any way excusing that. But he was sweeping the floor of this sinful world trying to recover those whom sin takes away from him. He was valuing those who had allowed the cares and pleasures and temptations of this world to lead away him. He still treasured them like silver coins. And he worked to reclaim them. He ate in their homes and answered their questions and called them to repent.

And the fact that we are here shows that he did that for us, too. That's the piece that the Pharisees and the teachers of the law missed. When Jesus said that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who don't need to repent, he's not saying God has no joy in us. God already rejoiced over us. We were all born as sinners who needed to repent. We were all the lost coin that needed to be found. We were all doomed to destruction. But Jesus searched and found us and gave us faith. And if we manage to slip out of his pocket and get lost again, his searching love will not give up on us. He wants us to be with him in heaven. All he does in the world, all he does with the word and sacrament, all the ways he guides our lives and leads us to that good news – all that is the true measure of his love.

III.

God's love is immeasurable. But he gives us many ways to get a glimpse of how big it is. In this lesson, there's one more way: the results. Luke tells us that tax collectors and sinners gathered around Jesus to hear him. We see that again and again in the gospels. Often, his words are challenging. Jesus never sugar coated anything. He didn't worry about whether people liked his message or not. He condemned sin and hypocrisy over and over again. And the part of Jewish society that lived in open sin hung on his every word. What does that tell us about Jesus? What does it tell us about ourselves and our message? My friends, **what is the true measure of love? Is it the response?**

Love provokes a response. Children love their mothers and fathers because those parents have been showering them with love and care for as long as they can remember. Now sadly, in a sinful world, love can provoke a different response. Twisted, sinful hearts sometimes don't want the love someone offers. They can even hate that love – spouses push each other away or teenagers run. But love doesn't usually leave us unmoved. If that's true of human love, what about God's love that sifts through the whole mass of humanity until it finds us? What about his foreknowing love that chose us before the world began? What about his forgiving love that looks at us through the life and death of Jesus and treats all our sins as if they never happened and that just rejoices to have us in his kingdom? That love cannot leave us unmoved or unchanged.

Jesus showed that love when he preached and taught those sinners and they listened. But they never responded like that to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. The Pharisees wanted them to. They were the hard core, true to the Bible crowd who strove to follow every little law God had given and they called everyone else to do the same. What response did they have from tax collectors and sinners? Those sinners hated and ignored them. But they flocked to Jesus.

Why? Because he loved them. He loved them and he confronted their sin. He loved them and he shared the message of forgiveness and life. He loved them and he earned the right to speak with them by sharing their lives, but refusing to elevate himself above them. Now, was there ever a person who deserved to look down on the sinful lives these people lived, more than Jesus did? He was the Son of God. He was absolutely perfect in all he said and did. But unlike the Pharisees, he did not consider his life to be an example that everyone else should wish they could follow. He was perfect in our place. He was perfect so that he could give us – and all sinners everywhere – credit for his life and his love. Then he showed what real love is when he laid down his life and died to take away all the sins of all the world. That love showed through in all he said and did, even when he said hard things.

Are we capable of that kind of love? My friends, I fear that we often come across as Pharisees. I fear that when we pastors and teachers speak, when we reprimand, when we demand, we drive away the very people God sends us to reclaim. I fear that when we church going members judge and condemn those who drift away, we forget how easy it would be for us to be like them. We forget that every person who is here today is a miracle of God's grace. The truth is, no sinner can ever come to God on his own. Our sinful natures always want to sin or they want to feel good about how great we are at not sinning. Only the Holy Spirit working in our hearts through the gospel can bring us here. And it's so easy for us to forget that. Forgetting that is what makes believers into Pharisees.

Are we guilty of that sin? I can only speak for myself: I am. Are you? Thank God there is forgiveness even for us. Jesus told these parables not because the crowds were following him but because the Pharisees were condemning him. He told these parables because he loved those Pharisees and wanted them to repent. Jesus loves us, too. Jesus loved God and all the sinners around him because the sinner inside us loves only himself. He died for the Pharisee that lives in all our hearts. That perfect life and that innocent death wipe all our sin away. The Holy Spirit came to us in the gospel and he made us his. Now he works in God's word to change our lives. To lead us to love. In that love, God opens the door for us to speak to those who need to hear.

My friends, for as long as this world endures, the church will need to reclaim those who slip away. Jesus does want us to sweep the floors and the light the lamps and find those who are lost. He does want us to rejoice over every sinner who repents. He does want us to love before we speak, while we speak and after we speak. And the power to do all that is in his love for us. He lived and died and rose so the angels in heaven could rejoice over our repentance. That sacrifice is the true measure of God's love for us. Live now in the love the Jesus showed you and joyfully, faithfully and gently reach out to the lost and the straying with that good news of Jesus' love. Amen.