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Pentecost 17 – Luke 15:1-10 – Never Forget

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Another September 11th has come and gone, and for 21 years now, it always happens that flags get lowered to half-mast, newspapers and TV stations commemorate the day with special articles and segments, and people all across the country stop to remember the 9/11 terrorist attacks that killed thousands of people in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington DC. “Never forget” is their rallying cry. Never forget what happened. Never forget the pain and the loss the families and this country as a whole had to suffer. Never forget those who sacrificed themselves to save others. Never forget the evil that caused this tragedy. And never forget that though we were knocked down, we must stand up stronger than ever and fight for what’s right.

It’s easy to remember where you were on that first 9/11 and what you felt when you saw and heard what happened, and it’s especially easy to recall all those things on the anniversary each year. But are there other days when you *have* forgotten? Probably not as much if you watch a lot of world news or do a lot of commercial flying. But for a lot of us, what happened on 9/11 isn’t something that effects our day-to-day thoughts and lives anymore. Maybe we haven’t forgotten, but maybe time *has* made us a little indifferent. Many of us have never even been to the east coast and we don’t know anyone who was personally effected by those terrorist attacks, so that makes it hard for us to really follow that call to “Never Forget.”

But what about when Jesus gives you that same call – only he’s not talking about lives lost in a terrorist attack, he’s talking about souls that might be lost for eternity. In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus teaches the Pharisees and teachers of the Law who thought everyone else was unworthy of salvation that in God’s sight, every soul is precious and so is worth seeking and saving. What Jesus taught them is the kind of attitude that he wants all his people to have: never forget the lost; never forget how valuable every single soul is to your Savior; and never forget the rejoicing in heaven over even one sinner who turns and repents.

Our story for today picks up where we left off a few weeks ago, when Jesus had been invited to the home of a prominent Pharisee for dinner. Jesus taught the Pharisees about having true humility and love that flow from faith in their Savior, but their hearts were hard and arrogant. That kind of message really turned the Pharisees off because they thought so highly of themselves and their own faithfulness to God’s Law, but Jesus’ message of grace and free forgiveness really appealed to all those tax collectors and sinners who didn’t measure up in the Pharisees’ eyes.

So as Jesus was still teaching at that prominent Pharisee’s house, our story goes on, “*Now the tax collectors and ‘sinners’ were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’*” What an ironic statement that was. The Pharisees meant to mock Jesus with those words and considered this why they could never respect or follow him as a true religious leader, when in fact Jesus welcoming sinners and eating with them is what actually makes him so great and what actually makes him the Savior that we all need. The Pharisees looked down with disdain on those sinners who gathered around Jesus, but it was actually those lowly sinners who were far more pleasing in God’s eyes because they received Jesus in faith. The Pharisees criticized Jesus for seeking and saving those who were unworthy of salvation, but in fact that is the very heart of the Gospel and exactly what Jesus came here to do – even for people like me and you.

And Jesus told them a parable to explain that. “*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? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’*” Back in those days, having a flock of a hundred sheep meant you were a fairly wealthy person. So all things considered, losing one sheep wouldn’t put you out on the street. It wouldn’t make you happy, but if you just shrugged your shoulders and said, “oh well, at least I still have ninety-nine,” you probably wouldn’t be any worse off. Your profit-loss margin would still look pretty good, and it might not even really be missed in a flock that big. After all, searching for it would be hard and time-consuming, and who knows whether you’d actually find it or not. Plus the nice thing about sheep is that they reproduce, so that lost sheep would just get replaced the natural way sometime soon anyway.

But no one really looks at it that way. It doesn’t matter if he is rich, a shepherd does not leave a lost sheep to die in the wilderness. You don’t just shrug your shoulders if one of your farm animals gets out or your dog runs away; you look for it because you love it and you care about it. Even though it may be a dumb animal that doesn’t know what’s good for it and that runs away from the person who feeds and protects it, a shepherd searches near and far and high and low for that lost sheep and he doesn’t give up until he finds it, because his heart can’t bear the thought of that sheep getting hurt or starving or falling prey to a wild animal. That sheep is precious to the shepherd not because of the dollar amount attached to it, but because it’s depended on him for everything since the day it was born and he loves it dearly, even to the point that he would risk his life to save it. And when he finds it, scared and exhausted as it is, he takes it into his arms with tender compassion and joy, picks it up on his shoulders, and brings it back home to celebrate, because the flock is whole again and all the sheep are safe and sound like they’re meant to be.

And then Jesus put it another way for the Pharisees, about why seeking the lost means so much to him – not just that he loves and cares about them, but because each and every one of them is valuable to him. *“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? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’”* These silver coins Jesus talks about were basically worth a day’s wages for a common worker, and it was normal for the woman of the house to keep ten of these coins as insurance or a life-savings in case her husband couldn’t find work or they lost their home for some reason. So maybe think of one of these coins being a \$100 bill for us. That’s not something a lot of people can just afford to throw away without a second thought. Even though she has nine left, that woman isn’t content to let the other one go. After all, it was hard-earned, and having that extra security means a lot to her family. So she searches until she finds it and then rejoices when she does, because that coin was far too valuable to just forget about.

So Jesus taught the Pharisees that the reason he seeks out the lost, the reason he strives to save sinners, is because he loves them and cares about them like a shepherd for his sheep, and because he values them like that woman looking for her lost coin. That really means a lot for us, doesn’t it, because aren’t we worth so much more to God than sheep and silver coins? And so shouldn’t we also see that value in others if that’s the way God treasures every single precious soul?

Put yourself in the place of that sheep. What a blessing it is for us to belong to Christ and be counted among his flock of believers. But how many ways do we act like that sheep who wanders away from the only one who really cares about it? When we take weeks off from church because we stayed up too late the night before or because we let too many other things get in the way so our priorities aren’t straight, we’re wandering away. When we get comfortable with being around and even joining in a sinful lifestyle, we’re wandering away. And when we’re like the Pharisees and we get so confident of our own relationship with Jesus that we don’t think we need worship and his Word as much as some other people, we’re wandering away.

But Jesus doesn’t just let us go. Even though we may not know what’s good for us a lot of times, Jesus loves you, Jesus cares about you, Jesus will never forget you, and he is constantly calling us back to himself. When you come to God looking for mercy like those tax collectors and sinners, you too will find your gracious Savior’s goodness and a warm welcome. And even though there are billions of people on earth rather than just one hundred, Jesus still sought you out personally and saved you for himself. Jesus brought you to himself with his grace and free forgiveness, he rejoices that he has you for his own, and he’s going to

carry you on his shoulders until you reach your heavenly home, because he’s the Good Shepherd who not only searched for you until he found you, but he’s the Good Shepherd who even laid down his life to save you.

And that’s important when you put yourself in the place of that coin, too. When God looks at us, he sees value – but not because we’re perfect in ourselves or we’ve done anything deserving of praise or a reward. God sees value in us because he created us specially to be his children, and because Jesus redeemed us with his holy, precious blood. So Christ searches for you because your souls were hard-earned through his suffering and death on the cross – that’s what he was willing to do for you! – he paid a tremendous price to open the doors to heaven for you that was so much more than just one silver coin, and he does not want that price to go to waste. A soul may not be highly prized in the market of this world, but it is more precious in God’s sight than all the gold on the earth, because he bought your soul for eternal life and he does not want to live through it without you.

So my brothers and sisters, let’s sit with those sinners who came to Jesus to be fed with his Word and his salvation – let’s sit right here in God’s house every week – and then let’s show that same kind of love and joy in seeking the lost like Jesus did. You don’t have to look far – we have probably 300-400 lost sheep in this congregation alone that we haven’t seen here in church in months or years. Never forget about them, and never forget about your family and friends and neighbors who don’t know Jesus yet. Let’s not be like those Pharisees, content to just let them stray further and further away from God as if we’re just fine without them. No, let’s love them enough to search after them diligently. Let’s care about them enough to encourage them patiently to come to their Savior. And let’s value them enough to see in them children of God for whom Christ died and to whom Christ calls with his offer of forgiveness and salvation, no matter who they are or what they’ve done. Never forget the lost because that’s what you were once too, but Jesus found you and brought you to himself – and that’s what he wants to do for others, too. And never forget that there is rejoicing in heaven over every lost sinner that repents and comes to faith, because that’s one more person that Christ’s work saved from the punishment we all rightly deserve, and that’s one more brother or sister who’ll join with us and the angels to sing our Savior’s praises in heaven for all eternity. Amen.