

Let Us Be Hearers!
Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost; Series C
Luke 15:1-10

You can hear them almost immediately upon entry. The flamingos at the San Diego Zoo. I am sure many of you know exactly what I am talking about. You walk into the Zoo and, most days, even amid the noise of the crowd, you can hear the colony of flamingos randomly calling and squawking. Also, on most days, large crowds of people gather to check out the noise. It seems to me that you generally have two groups of people that gather to check out these birds. Those that come just to see what the noise is all about and then, annoyed by clatter and not too impressed to find out that the source is just a colony of flamingos, the people in this first group quickly move on to see other animals, perhaps quieter, more interesting, and more exotic ones. People in the other group come to check out the colony of flamingos and they stay awhile. They seem to be able to get beyond the initial noise and are intrigued by the behavior of the birds while they utter the noise. These people seem to be interested in why the flamingos make their calls with their necks upward, while flagging their heads and flapping their wings. People in this group observe the flamingos stomping their webbed feet in the mud and standing on one leg with the other tucked beneath them and they wonder why.

In our Gospel reading two groups gathered around Jesus. One group is the Pharisees and Scribes. They are the “righteous” people in the eyes of all. They obey God’s Ten Commandments and generally live as good citizens. For this reason they simply did not like what Jesus preached and taught. Jesus did not assume that the Pharisees were righteous by what they did. He did not think that they were righteous in the eyes of God by simply obeying the Ten Commandments. During his Ministry Jesus told others to be aware of the teaching of the Pharisees because it could lead them astray. It could lead people to trust in themselves and their actions first and foremost. The Pharisees and Scribes gathered around Jesus, but not to hear him. They gathered not to understand what he was saying but they gathered to test and trap him. They gathered to criticize and condemn. They were ultimately concerned about ruining his reputation and destroying his credibility. They were “lost” and just didn’t know it.

The second group is the tax collectors and sinners. They are “unrighteous” people in the eyes of others. This is how we ought to understand “sinners” here, not necessarily according to the opinion of God but according to the opinion of others. These people committed some grave offense toward others or with their own bodies that tainted their reputations in the opinion of their fellow citizens. According to the Religious leaders, the Pharisees and Scribes, they were law-breakers in the greatest sense. They have broken God’s Ten Commandments. A person was not to associate with this class of people lest they too ruin their own reputation and be counted as one of them. Yet, we read in the Gospel reading this morning that they gathered *for the purpose* of hearing Jesus. They even broke bread and ate with him, hearing what he had to say, hanging on his every word. They did not come to test and trap but to ask and absorb. And Jesus received them. They came to ask questions and to absorb his teaching. These sinners and tax collectors were also “lost,” but unlike the Pharisees and Scribes, they were very aware of their condition. This is why they came to hear Jesus. They believed he could rescue them.

The Pharisees and Scribes and the tax collectors and sinners. The righteous and the unrighteous, from society’s point of view. These are the two groups we discover in our Gospel reading. Just as the pink flamingos at the San Diego Zoo

attract the crowds, Jesus attracts both of these groups, but for different purposes. From Jesus' perspective, the people of both groups are "lost" and need to be "found." It's just that some agree with Jesus and others do not.

Jesus tells two parables in our Gospel reading about things that were once lost now being found. In the case of the lost sheep, the one sheep perhaps knew that it was lost. When sheep are aware that they are lost or in danger, they often make a loud, often irritating sound called "bleating." Perhaps this one sheep that had wandered from the other ninety-nine was aware that it was lost. Maybe it was "bleating." Regardless whether this sheep knew it was lost or not, it couldn't do anything about its situation. Sheep being sheep, they are helpless and foolish animals. They need constant care, watching, and protection. By themselves they are an easy prey. They cannot find their way back to the flock or the Shepherd on their own, even if they do know that they are lost. It makes no difference. In this way, the lost sheep can be compared to those sinners and tax collectors. They knew that, in the eyes of others, they were the lost ones, the ones considered law-breakers and sinners. They just couldn't do anything about it. So they go to the one who they heard speak and act with compassion and understanding toward the law-breakers and sinners, the marginalized in society.

The second parable Jesus tells is of a woman who loses a coin that is the worth of about a day of wages in the first century ancient world. She has ten of them, but every one is precious to her, so when she loses even one, she must search diligently to find it. Since she lives in a house that likely had a dirt floor and no windows, she brings to her side some items to assist her in the quest—a broom and lamp. Perhaps Jesus intended for the coin to represent those who were in good standing in the nation of Israel—those like the Scribes and Pharisees. They were in the nurture and care of God, receiving his Law and covenants and special protection. Yet, somehow they wiggled out from under his watchful eye. They, like a lost coin, are lost but do not know it. They are not "bleating." They are not seeking to be found. The Pharisees and Scribes are content on the dirt floor in the dark house.

God is not content with the situation as it is. He is not content with his sheep wandering from the flock and his coins dropping from his possession. This is why he sent the Good Shepherd. This is why he sent the one to seek and find. In the judgment and opinion of God all are in need of being rescued, fixed up, and restored to his possession. All are in need of the compassion of a Good Shepherd since every single person is considered of great worth, like a valuable coin to its owner. Regardless whether a person is of the opinion that he or she needs to be rescued or not, God sent his Son on a rescue mission.

Chapter 15 of the Gospel of Luke is, in many respects, one of the great chapters of the Bible. It has three wonderful parables that illustrate the love and compassion of God for all people. These parables illustrate this theme with rich, powerful imagery. The third parable is the one famously called the "Prodigal Son." It could also be called the "Forgiving Father," emphasizing the Father's love for both of his lost sons. We didn't hear that parable this morning but I do want to bring a line from it for your attention this morning. It is verse 20: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." While you and I were still a long way off, God had it as his plan and purpose to come to you, to seek you out, and call you through the Gospel. He sought to bring the death and resurrection work of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, to you, that you might be restored to a flock of his fold and numbered as his treasured possession.

He has restored you as one of his people so that you can “hear.” He has called you to belong to this flock of his fold here at Atonement Lutheran. And he wants you to be a joyful hearer of his Word. He wants you to delight in knowing him and trusting him more and more through the power of his Spirit at work in you. Through the hearing you become more joyful. And when we are filled with the joy of the Gospel, the joy of being found and restored to God once again, we cannot help but share it. This is why both of those parables that Jesus told end with joy. The Shepherd shares his joy and the woman shares her joy. The joy of the Gospel is never in isolation. We share it with one another here at Atonement and we take it with us in our vocations and stations of life. Let us be joyful hearers so that all may hear and be filled with joy. For, you were lost but now are found! Amen.