

The Lost Sheep

2016 - Trinity 3 - Gospel

June 12, 2016

Holy Trinity Church, Fernandina Beach, FL

Standing let us pray:

O Lord, may I not speak with the plausible words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of thy Spirit and power; that our faith may not rest in the wisdom of men but upon the power of God. In the name of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen.

The Ordo Kalendar:

On the Church Calendar, Trinity Sunday is, in a certain sense, the “end”. You may think, “It’s after Trinity Sunday, and I’m still here”, but bear with me. The Holy Church completed another cycle of meditating upon the great work of God in Jesus Christ for the salvation of the entire world. The structure of our Calendar clues us to exactly what the Church desires us to know about God. So we follow the life of our Lord Jesus Christ from his Advent to his Ascension. We consider his birth and circumcision, his baptism and temptation in the wilderness, his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his trial and wounds, his death on Calvary’s mount, his glorious resurrection, and finally his Ascension. After Jesus Christ’s Ascension, we celebrate the Holy Ghost’s descent on Pentecost Sunday when he established the Church with fire and power, with all of it leading to the following Sunday dedicated to celebrating how God revealed himself in his nature as Holy Trinity. The entire calendar works to move us to know God as he truly is between Advent and Trinity, but now we consider the

Christian life. The time between Trinity Sunday and the next First Sunday in Advent, is called Trinitytide. Trinitytide has also been called “Ordinary Time”, but this name is somewhat unfortunate in contemporary culture because it denotes “plainness” or, even worse, “boredom”, and this time is anything but boring. This is the time where the Church considers God and herself in the light of God’s revelation of himself as Triune. Permit me an analogy Beloved. When one gets to the end of a classic mystery novel, the villain is revealed, and so the journey from the beginning to the end is complete, however, if you reflect on the novel with the villain in mind, the events and clues leading up to the big reveal take on a new and richer meaning. In the same way, Trinitytide gives us the great gift to reflect upon our God and his great work of Salvation in the light of the truth of who God is – that He is one God in three Persons. And so we repeat this pattern year after year, but we are not going around in circles Beloved. God willing, as all of us grow in faith and holiness, this pattern will not seem circular, but rather like a spiral where our knowledge of God and faith deepen with every passing year.

With the structure of our calendar in mind, the Church invites us to consider the great love of God for the first two Sundays after Trinity, with love being God’s very nature. Indeed, we read in St. John’s first epistle that “God is love”. He goes on to say that God’s love was manifested among us in that he sent his Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ into the world to be the propitiation for sins. This Sunday, the third Sunday after Trinity, we read how God demonstrates that love. Because God is love, he manifests that love. God’s love demonstrated is called mercy, and even beyond mercy its name is grace. Particularly, we find it in today’s Gospel reading in the parable of the Lost Sheep.

The Lost Sheep:

Parables are a tool in Jesus' toolbox for which he often reaches, and in this particular case he tells these parables in response to the grumbling and murmuring of the Pharisees and Scribes (the religious leaders of the Jews in Jesus' day) over why he received and ate with "sinners and publicans". Jesus responds with,

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?

There must be some irony in Jesus' words. Who **would** risk the health and safety of the ninety-nine in favor to search for the one? On the surface it would certainly not make economic sense to leave the ninety-nine to in the open country to go and search for the lost one. What if the other sheep go astray? After all these animals do not have a reputation for being beacons of intelligence. Conventional and worldly wisdom would suggest that the shepherd cut his losses, and leave this one lost sheep to his inevitable demise because the risks outweigh the rewards.

But let us assume the shepherd left the ninety-nine with a trusted friend and they would be safe while he was gone. The shepherd would still assume great personal risk to retrieve his lost sheep. The rough and hilly terrain of the countryside in Israel are pitfalls to the unwary traveller. One wrong step could send you over a cliff. We can imagine that the shepherd goes to retrieve his sheep when it is dusk and his vision will be further limited as the daylight wanes. Geographic problems notwithstanding, there are thieves and highway robbers as real and present threats to our shepherd. Remember that the parable of the Good Samaritan begins with a man being beaten, robbed, and left for dead. Emergency responders do not

exist during the time of Jesus' earthly life. A further risk to the shepherd's health are animals that have an appetite - for both sheep and men. The Bible mentions bears, wolves, and lions as natural predators for sheep. If we were friends of this shepherd we would advise him not to go outside the good pastures of the open country to seek the one lost sheep. It's not worth the personal risk, and, if truth be told, it's probably too late for the one lost sheep. With Jesus Christ's first words we find that he is telling us of a different shepherd.

But there is more to Jesus' shepherd analogy than meets the eye; something that the Pharisees and Scribes would comprehend. Hear God speaking through the prophet Ezekiel chapter 34:

My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them. Therefore, ye shepherds, hear the word of the LORD; As I live, saith the Lord GOD, surely because my flock became a prey, and my flock became meat to every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, neither did my shepherds search for my flock, but the shepherds fed themselves, and fed not my flock...For thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day.

There are two aspects in Ezekiel's prophecy that shed some light on the parable: **First**, the analogy of the shepherd is one that God often uses with those whom he calls to

lead his people. Moses, was truly tending sheep when God called him to deliver Israel from bondage in Egypt at the burning bush. Through Moses, God gave the law and the covenant to Israel. The prophet Samuel anointed David King over Israel after calling him from the fields, where he was shepherding sheep. David defeated Goliath by God's grace after comparing him to a lion or bear that would come and snatch a sheep from the flock. David went out to defend God's flock from the predators that would seek to devour the sheep. It is no accident that the first to hear of the birth of our Savior were shepherds. They went away praising God and telling the sheep of Israel about the birth of the salvation of the entire world! The shepherds announcing the birth of Jesus Christ at the Nativity were herding the flock back to God, in the same way in which our Lord Jesus Christ tells Saints Peter and Andrew, while they were casting nets, that they would be "fishers of men".

But the prophet Ezekiel speaks of different shepherds - wicked ones. Ones that allowed beasts of the field to devour the people of God. Certainly, Israel's history saw many wicked kings that eventually led Israel to God's judgment, but Jesus is telling this parable in front of Pharisees and Scribes. He's telling it in front of Israel's *current* shepherds. Jesus says in St. Matthew's Gospel that the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat and possess Moses' authority. They are the ones to whom Ezekiel's prophecy applies! They missed the message of Moses and the prophets. They were content to allow lost sheep languish and die, instead of showing mercy and calling them to repentance. Contrast the Pharisee's comfort and position in Jewish society to St. John the Baptizer who called the people to prepare for the coming of Jesus Christ. He wore hair shirts and ate locusts and honey for the sake that the people **should be**

ready to receive the Savior of the World. He did the work that the Pharisee's should have been doing all along.

Second, God promises to deliver his sheep by his own hand. The importance of this part of the prophecy cannot be understated, and with the witness of other Gospels Jesus makes an incredible claim. Jesus Christ also takes on the same mantle of the Shepherd which God used to name his anointed kings, but Jesus not only assumes the title of Shepherd, he modifies and expands it. St. John's Gospel tells us that Jesus is the Good Shepherd; the one who lays down his life for the sheep. He is the final shepherd that would appear to gather in the flock from all nations, which is the Church. In the parable of the Lost Sheep, Jesus references himself as the shepherd who seeks the lost sheep. So Jesus makes an astounding, yet implicit claim in this parable. Jesus Christ claims to fulfill Ezekiel's prophecy as the one who promised to gather in the sheep – Jesus claims that he is God in flesh.

So we see that the parable of the lost sheep shows forth the eternal mercy and grace that flows out of the great love of the Godhead. Jesus Christ tells the parable in response to the murmuring of the Pharisees of why he receives sinners. So the lost sheep surely represent humanity itself and the entire parable demonstrates God's great love for us, where Jesus depicts his divine mission for all to hear! He calls out to the sinner, the sick, and the dying, and, in turn offers, mercy and grace to forgive trespasses, heal infirmities, and even raise us up into life. So Jesus Christ, eternally begotten Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, God himself, takes on flesh and blood in order to rescue sheep after the promise of God in Ezekiel. He enters into a world that is hostile to him. But the obstacles of terrain, robbers,

and predators do not phase our Lord. When he goes to retrieve lost sheep in order to bring them home to the good pasture of God, he does not consider his own glory, but empties himself and takes the form of a servant. When he enters into Creation, he does not desire his own personal safety, but instead chooses to bleed and to die for us, his sheep, on the cross. Carrying the sheep home on his shoulders would come at great personal cost to God himself.

Now, Consider the two images that the Holy Scriptures give us for today. St. Luke presents to us our suffering and risen Lord Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, the one who seeks out the sinner who was lost and carries him home to God on his strong shoulders, while St. Peter, in the epistle lesson, warns us of the devil, a ravenous lion who prowls around seeking to devour whoever he can. The Church, in her wisdom, brings these two readings together to confront us with the sobering fact that being lost is a dangerous state! We have an enemy that wishes for our destruction, but thanks be to God that our Good Shepherd, has come to conquer this lion, free us from his jaws, and carry us back home by dying and rising from the dead. Even now, he carries us. When we confess our sins, he pulls us from the thorny briars. When we partake in the Eucharist, he feeds us at good pastures, and finally at the end of days we will receive eternal rest by his hand, as the parable states, “in the open country” of God. The only salvation for lost sheep can come from the shepherd carrying them home. Our salvation depends completely on the grace and power of God.

The Altar:

This parable is good news for lost sheep; it was good news for the publicans and sinners that surrounded Jesus, and it should ring as good news in our own ears. It does not take very much examination of our own lives to realize that we too are lost sheep. In St. Paul's words from his epistle to the Romans, all men have fallen short of God's glory, and that every one of us should indeed identify with the one who was lost and not the ninety-nine who remained in innocence. We all need to be rescued from sin and the mouth of the lion. St. Peter discusses the key to the whole endeavor when he says *God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble*. The publicans and sinners at the beginning of the parable flocked to Jesus. They understood that they needed grace and forgiveness, and they were wise to know that Jesus could give it. The Pharisees, in their pride, refused to recognize their true state. Instead of seeing themselves with the "publicans and sinners" as men in need of grace, they saw themselves as more, and in their pride, they relied on their own religiosity rather than throwing themselves at the feet of Jesus, and missed the opportunity to receive grace.

At the altar today, Jesus will feed his sheep with heavenly food and drink that will give life to us in the very thing he took to himself at his Incarnation: his own body and blood. Now it is fitting to humble ourselves in quiet adoration at God's demonstrable love to receive this heavenly gift, for the grace that the Lord Jesus Christ won for us at Calvary is only accessible in humility where we depend not on ourselves for salvation, but upon the goodness and strength of the shepherd - Jesus Christ - God himself. We have no better example than the one of Jesus Christ himself who left the right hand of the Father to become man. Without his humility in becoming one of us, there would be no salvation for mankind.

I asked you at the beginning to consider reexamining the life of Jesus in the light of who God is as Holy Trinity Without the power of the Triune God at work we would not have the rescue we need. Jesus Christ took to himself our nature at the will of the Father and by the power of the Holy Ghost. The love that defines the very being of God was made manifest towards us by his grace in Jesus Christ, that Good Shepherd of sheep. At his Incarnation, he left his glorious throne to find the ones who were lost. Beloved, he came to seek me and you. So let us persevere, by God's grace and humble faith, in his love to the end of days that we may find eternal rest in and through Jesus Christ our Lord.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND THE SON AND THE HOLY GHOST.

AMEN.