

Seeking the Lost

15th Sun. after Pent. – 09/06/26 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Matthew 18:1-20 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 11, “**The Son of Man came to save the lost.**”

v. 14, “**So, it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones might perish.**”

Introduction

✧ Today, more and more Christians are wandering from the faith. Millions, across every denomination, are leaving their churches. And many of those become what sociologists call “nones” – because they don’t affiliate with any congregation, denomination, or religion. A recent study by the Pew Research Center reveals that the percentage of Americans who identify as Christian has dropped by almost one-third in the past 50 years and that about one-third of young people leave the church before they reach the age of 30 (<https://religionnews.com/2022/09/13/fewer-than-half-of-americans-may-be-christian-by-2070-according-to-new-projections/>).

➔ What’s most important though, of course, is that these figures are more than just statistics. They are people. And some of them are people you and I care about and love personally. I am confident that you all know someone who has left the Christian faith for some other religion or for no religion at all. This person might be in your own family – a son or daughter, a sister or brother, a grandchild, a niece or nephew. He might be a friend or neighbor. She might be someone that you used to see in worship regularly but now is never present in church.

✧ The important question though, is this: How do we respond? What is our reaction to our family members, friends, and congregation members who drift away from the faith; from the Christian fellowship of which God intends for us believers to be a part in His Church? Even more importantly, what is God’s response to these wanderers?

I. Our Inclination: Surrender the Lost.

✧ Most often, our response is to surrender these de-churched people to their own wandering, which means that we often are then *surrendering these straying souls* to their eternal peril. It’s easy to see why this happens. We get frustrated at the situation. We run out of ideas of how we can help them. So we place them in the category of permanently lost causes and we desert them. Far too often that means we no longer seek them out; we no longer pursue them; neglecting then to even try and beckon them back to Christ and His church.

➔ In today’s text from Matthew, chapter 18, Jesus warns that any and all believers can wander from the faith. He shares the story of one out of a hundred sheep who wanders from the flock (vv. 12–14). It’s meant to illustrate how a person; someone who has already been a part of God’s flock of believers, now wanders from the faith. Jesus’ primary concern for this wandering soul is that he/she, by doing so, is placing themselves in peril of perishing eternally.

✧ There is a doctrine though that circulates through much of Protestantism that claims, “once saved, always saved.” This teaching maintains that once someone is a Christian he/she will never fall away from the faith; “they can’t.” We Lutherans who hold to the truth of God’s Word however, disagree with that teaching, based in part upon today’s text from Matthew. If Jesus agreed with “once saved, always saved,” He would certainly not be warning us here against the very real danger of someone straying or falling away from their faith, would He?

➔ Yet, although we reject the teaching of “once saved, always saved,” there is a flip side on that doctrine that is just as dangerous; that we all must be equally cautious not to fall into. That false belief is “once lost, always lost.” Far too often we can find ourselves falsely and unlovingly abandoning a wandering sheep who has rejected Jesus to their lost condition.

➔ Many times, when brothers and sisters have distanced themselves from Jesus and His family of faith, we too quickly honor their deadly decision by failing to pursue them; by cutting all ties because we think, “Well, they have made it clear that their faith-rejection is none of our business.” So, like Cain of old, we excuse our involvement with Cain’s excuse in Genesis 4:9, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” American society encourages this unhealthy apathy, saying that a person’s religious faith is completely private and personal. So we say these most-unloving words, “I don’t want to get involved.” We then ignore the entire second half of the Ten Commandments that is stated eight different times in Scripture, that we are to “love [our] neighbor as [ourselves]” (Mt. 22:39). And in doing so, we surrender those who wander from the Church to their eternal demise.

- ✘ Jesus is very direct in His warning against this kind of attitude within His Christian flock in verse 10, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones.” And make no mistake, when Jesus refers to those struggling in their faith as “little ones” He is not only talking about young children. No, He uses that term to emphasize that all believers, no matter their age or spiritual maturity, are God’s beloved children in need of special care and attention.

➔ So, if we chose to no longer care for them, we are in effect, despising these brothers and sisters. And now we are sinning against them and against God by our lack of love; by no longer even treating them as God expects His flock to love and care about and reach out to all people of all nations! God says in verse eight of our Old Testament Reading today, if “you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand” (Ez. 33:8).

II. God Seeks the Lost

- ✘ One thing is for sure, God does not hold to that false, “once lost, always lost” philosophy! No, God is committed to seek after the lost. Jesus confirms that fact in verse 14 of our text: “It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” If He did believe in the idea of “once lost, always lost” He would have never even sent Jesus to save us, would He.

➔ So Jesus presents an illustration that would have been abundantly common to everyone in His day, comparing the seeking and saving work of God to that of a shepherd who pursues one lost sheep. This shepherd cares so much for all of His sheep that when only one of them strays, He drops everything else to diligently search after and rescue that one lost soul. Jesus even says he will “leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray” (v. 12). Then, when the shepherd finds the lost sheep, “he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray” (v. 13).

➔ You see, there is no such thing as saying to the God who created us and gave us life, that “my life is none of Your business.” No, God knows that’s only the voice of one who has fallen prey to the lies and deceptions of sin and this sin-soaked world. So He actively seeks after people when they are lost and He celebrates greatly when He is able to restore them to Himself. It’s then, instead of thinking, “once lost, always lost,” that our grace-filled heavenly Father exclaims with joy, just as the forgiving father did in the parable of the prodigal son, “This my son ... was lost, and is found” (Lk. 15:24)!

- ✘ God refused to abandon any of the sinful and wayward souls throughout all of humanity. And that is why Jesus came to this world in human flesh. As He said in Luke 19:10, He “came to seek and to save the lost.” And that includes every single one of us here today.

➔ Isaiah told how God would do this, saying: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and Yahweh has laid *on Him* the iniquity of us all” (Is. 53:6).

➔ You see, as our loving Father, God had to use some tough discipline to bring us sinners back into His fold. But He didn't use that judgment and wrath against us directly. Instead, in love, He used it for us; issuing it out against His own perfect Son who came to bear our sin and the punishment it deserves in our place. He didn't deserve it, but Jesus willingly took the punishment for our sins; the penalty for our wandering; and the price of our despising of others who wander. Jesus was forsaken. He was rejected on the cross so that we might be found and received back into the fold. He came, as Jesus says in verse 11, "to save the lost," you, me and all sinners everywhere!

III. God Commissioned Us to Seek the Lost.

✘ And we, of course, rejoice that God has sought us in our sin; that He has rescued us from eternal death through Jesus. So, now that we are blessed to be safely with Him and His other beloved sheep in the flock, God does not intend for our lives as His sheep to only be filled with selfishly grazing on His green pastures of grace and becoming nothing more than fat, over-fed, lazy sheep.

➔ No, God's plan for the abundant and blessed life of His sheep is as Jesus said in John 13:34, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." So, how do you and I do that? How do we share Jesus' love with those fellow disciples who are going astray as wandering sheep? Well, God has commissioned us, through Jesus, to pursue our brothers and sisters who may be straying from their faith in Christ; who may be wandering from the fold of the Good Shepherd.

✘ That's the real life application that Jesus gives to all believers after His story of the lost sheep. In verse 15 He says, "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother" (v. 15). One of my seminary professors, Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs, who wrote a commentary on the book of Matthew said of this verse, "Jesus has in mind a situation where one who has been a fellow disciple now seems to be in peril of no longer being a brother. He is in danger of losing all faith and salvation" (*Matthew*, Gibbs, pg. 918).

➔ This is exactly the kind of situation where the devil will tempt you and me to think, "It's really none of my business." But Jesus' love that reached out and saved you and me, should compel us, to lovingly have that uncomfortable conversation with this person for whom Jesus gave His life as well. It is the very definition of "tough love," meaning it will likely be just as tough for me to initiate as it will be for my brother/sister to hear. But folks, it is not mean; it is not legalistic to show love and to be concerned about a fellow Christian who is falling away from Jesus. In fact, not to reach out to that person because we fear offending him/her is a far greater disservice.

✘ Jesus is clear, the goal of such interaction is to gain the brother back; to restore him from his "lost" condition.

➔ So Jesus lays out the whole blessed process in verses 15 through 18. It's a process of urgent and persistent care for the one who has strayed and is thus far unwilling to acknowledge or repent of his sin. It begins with a personal and private confrontation, "between you and him alone" (v. 15). Then in verse 16 Jesus says, "If he does not listen"; in other words, "if he continues to stray from Jesus", then other members of the church are included to spread the love and try to bring that wandering sheep back to Jesus. If even their voices are rebuffed, and no certain repentance results, then Jesus says in verse 17 that the entire congregation will need to speak in a more serious way; showing that person that he is removing himself from Jesus by his sinful persistence. Yet even this hard word must always be spoken in love; with the urgent purpose of warning the brother that his sin is potentially leading him to eternal death. The goal though, is always, always restoration; that the one who is lost might be restored to faith in Christ and then joyfully embraced back into the full fellowship of Christ's Church.

Conclusion

- ✂ Why has Jesus given us this story of the one lost sheep? Why has He given us this process of accountability with one another? Because, with Jesus, we do not subscribe to the idea of “once lost, always lost” when it comes to those we know who are straying from Jesus’ flock of believers.
 - ➔ No, just as Jesus did the hard thing; seeking us out in our sin-filled state and rescuing us from Satan’s deadly grasp, so He dispenses His saving love now through us toward the wandering souls in our scope of contact.
 - ➔ Why? Because it is not our Father’s will that any of His little ones might perish, but that all will believe in Jesus and thereby be saved by Him!
- ✂ To Jesus, be all the glory! Amen.