

17TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

SEPTEMBER 15, 2013

LOVE THAT FOUND ME - WONDROUS THOUGHT

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(Quotes are from Max Lucado, *A Gentle Thunder*, pp.15-19 and Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Theology of the Cross", *Lutheran Quarterly*, vol 16, 2002, p.449)

Luke 15:1-10

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

15 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. **2** And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

3 So he told them this parable: **4** "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? **5** And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. **6** And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' **7** Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

8 "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? **9** And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' **10** Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

"Eddie Rickenbacker was America's top combat flying ace in WWI. He was credited with shooting down 26 enemy aircraft. But he might be best remembered not for what he shot out of the sky but for what he caught out of the sky.

Here's the story.

As WWII started, Rickenbacker was no longer a soldier. But he was sent to deliver a secret message to General Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines. On his way to the Philippines, the B-17 on which he was aboard became lost and had to ditch into the ocean. Yet, they survived with the help of inflatable life rafts. After just three days, though, they ran out of food.

Now, every morning they prayed together. One crewmember, John Bartak, continually read his Bible out loud. Another crewmember, James Whitaker, who was not yet a believer, didn't appreciate that, but Bartak would not stop. On the eighth day, after their morning prayers, Eddie Rickenbacker leaned his head back against his life raft and pulled his hat over his eyes. A bird landed on his head. Rickenbacker peered out from under his hat. He knew it was a seagull. Cautiously, Rickenbacker reached out and caught the seagull. The crew divided it up and ate it. The bird's intestines were used for bait, and they caught fish to eat. And the crew amazingly survived for 24 days before they were finally rescued. And also amazingly, that moment when the seagull landed on Eddie Rickenbacker's head was when James Whitaker became a believer.

"Who would go to such extremes to seek the lost? Who would send a missionary seagull to the middle of the Pacific Ocean to win just one lost person for Christ? God would. Oh, the extremes to which God goes. It is God who pursues us." (Lucado) How can that be? He is the Creator and Sustainer of the whole Universe. We're just fallen human beings. Well, we may never fully understand this truth, but God's Word assures us it is true. It is God who pursues us. He is the Good Shepherd who seeks and finds the one lost sheep. God is the One who seeks and finds the one lost coin. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost," Jesus says of Himself in Luke 19:10. And oh the extreme to which Jesus goes to seek the lost. To seek James Whitaker, the Lord sent a seagull. To seek St. Paul, the Lord went to the extreme of making a personal visit.

To seek St. Augustine, the Lord went to the extreme of sending some children. They were playing a game and calling out to each other, "Pick it up! Pick it up!" At that moment, Augustine happened to be nearby sitting on a bench with a Bible open on his lap. He had wandered from the faith, taking a mistress. But on hearing the words of those children, he picked up the Bible from his lap and read the words before him, which just happened to be Romans 13:13-14: 'There should be no sexual sins of any kind, no fighting or jealousy. But clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and forget about satisfying your sinful self.' That very day he said goodbye to his mistress and followed Christ instead." (Lucado)

To seek Martin Luther, the Lord went to the extreme of sending a thunderstorm. Luther got caught out in a thunderstorm one day. In fear, he pleaded to God for his life, promising to enter the priesthood. He kept that promise. He gave up studying law to enter a monastery. It was as a monk that Luther began to read the Bible for himself. And it changed him.

Oh, the extreme to which God goes to seek the lost, for He is the pursuer.

We are those who rejoice with God over the one sinner who repents. It sounds like we have the easier job, but it's not as easy as it sounds. Whitaker still needed to hear what's in the Bible from John Bartak. Augustine and Luther needed to read it. That's where we come in. The way that we rejoice over God's seeking and finding is by sharing the Word of God with unbelievers. And the only way we get to do that is if we engage them, be present in their lives, love them. That's what Jesus did with people. He engaged people, invited them, was present with them, ate with them, loved them. And Jesus' love for them drew them to Himself. "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus." (Luke 15:1-10) His love for them, His loving presence in their lives, drew them to Himself to hear what He had to say. It gained for Him the opportunity to share God's Word with them.

Yet, can we invite folks who are involved in various kinds of sexual sins – or illegal kinds of business?

The Pharisees did not rejoice about the kinds of people Jesus was seeking. They grumbled: "This man receives sinners and eats with them." The word for sinners that the Pharisees used in this case was not a nice word. It was not a general word that could be used to say, "We are all sinners." It was a word that indicated that these folks Jesus was inviting and eating with were not yet repentant. These folks were involved in various kinds of sexual sins. These folks were involved in the kinds of business that had gotten them thrown out of the synagogue. Still, Jesus sought them. Invited them. Ate with them. Loved them. Would we?

The good news is that they are no different from us, when we are measured against God's standard. So, a few moments ago, we sang the words, "Chief of sinners though I be." We did not sing "Chief of sinners though you are." We did not sing, "We are all sinners in a general sort of way." We did not sing "Chief of sinners though I was."

We sang what Paul says in 1 Timothy 1:15: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of which I **am** the foremost." Paul does not thank the Lord that he is no longer such a bad sinner as he was before when he murdered Christians. He does not say, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I **was** the foremost," but rather "of whom I **am** the foremost." The verb is present tense. Just like in the hymn. According to God's laws, we **are** the worst of sinners, like everybody else. Chief of sinners though I be. Jesus went to extremes for me. Jesus shed His blood for me. "All of the Law's accusations against us have been nailed to the cross with Jesus and have been soaked to the point of being unreadable." (Kolb)

The same applies to those who are not yet repentant. They just need to hear that Word of Good News. Because whether they are James Whitaker listening to John Bartak read the Bible out loud on a life raft. Or whether they are Martin Luther himself, they all still need to hear God's Word.

"Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." (Romans 10:17)

But these sinners might never have listened to the Word of God if something extreme didn't happen, like a seagull, or children playing, or a thunderstorm. Maybe you will be that extreme in their life. Maybe God will use your loving presence, your loving invitation, your loving welcome, and your love will be the *extreme* that God uses to seek them and draw them to Himself. So that one-day they will listen to the Word of God that we proclaim and that we share. And the One who seeks them will bring about their repentance, and we will rejoice.

Amen