

**Pentecost 17C + September 11, 2016**  
**Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit**  
**Luke 15:1-10**

Nancy Raabe, Pastor

Did you notice what happened at the end of our Exodus lesson that Sue read a few minutes ago? “And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.” This was just what Moses had begged God to do: “Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind, do not bring disaster on your people.” There are other places in the Old Testament where we are told that God changes his mind. Remember the story in Genesis where God says if he finds 50 righteous people in Sodom, he will not destroy it, but Abraham gradually talks him down to ten, like an experienced salesman? It’s almost humorous the way that episode unfolds: 50, 45, 40, 30, 20 and finally ten.

Of course, God doesn’t ever actually change God’s mind about anything because he is omniscient – all-knowing, all-seeing, past, present and future. What is really going on in the Exodus reading is a metaphor for repentance, OUR repentance. Changing one’s mind is a distinctively human characteristic. We are also faced with the mystery in which God ordains not only the outcome of things, but the *means by which they come to pass*.

In the Old Testament, God’s main goal is to move his people to repent. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures often does this with various kinds of cataclysmic threats, just as in our Exodus reading today: Because the people were worshiping the golden calf, God tells Moses he is going to consume them with fire. In the New Testament, “repentance” implies a fundamental shift in orientation. The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means a change of mind or heart. When we repent, we turn away from sin, toward God. But HOW do we change our heart, or what changes it? What is the impetus for turning us back to God? That is the question!

Let's look these two little parables from Luke 15 in our Gospel reading for today. On the surface they are about things that are lost and then found. But, as Jesus makes clear at the end of each, they are both really about repentance. So they invite us not only to witness the recover of the lost, but to ponder HOW the lost are found.

Two central themes in both parables are diligence and celebration. One sheep among 100 becomes lost, one coin among 10 becomes lost. Both are of great value because the 100 sheep and the 10 coins are probably the entire livelihood of their respective owners. The shepherd scours the wilderness until he finds the one lost sheep. Imagine him going up hills, down valleys, across deserts, looking in behind bushes and in caves, never giving up. The woman lights a lamp, sweeps the entire house, and searches for the coin in every nook and cranny. Good news: They both find what they are looking for. And what is the outcome in both? A big party! Rejoicing with friends and neighbors! Joy in heaven, joy in the presence of the angels! All over just one sheep and one coin! So it is with God, Jesus says, when even one sinner repents.

So, who or what brings about the change of heart, the *metanoia*? God in Christ Jesus is our shepherd, the one who will go any length to find us. When we are lost, God always knows it, and God ALWAYS wants to find us and bring us back.

We have probably all been on the brink of despair at one time or another, in which we feel we are lost to God. A close family member has died and we can't imagine how we can go on without them. Old age is closing in, our bodies don't work right anymore, we hurt, and we are tempted to just throw in the towel. Or perhaps we are held hostage, turned away from God – imprisoned by guilt for a sin we committed long ago and can't forgive ourselves for; bound in chains by scorn, humiliation, and abuse heaped on us by others; in bondage to some form of

addiction, attachments that control us, that we refuse to admit even to ourselves. Or maybe we are just feeling hopeless, lonely, and lost, because that's what life has come to.

God knows where we are. God knows everything about us. So we're not REALLY lost in God's sight. But it can feel as if we are. What turns us around? It's not all God's work; we play a part in this process. For the lost sheep, it meant not running and running but, at some point, staying put. For us in our running from God, it means pausing long to allow a spark of hope to be lit within us, and to take notice of that. The spark can be ignited by a kind word by a stranger, a generous gesture by a friend, an unexpected experience because of which we see things in a new way, or maybe even by a spectacular sunset that seems to go on forever, shifting minute by minute from one brilliant hue to another and taking our breath away with each shift. This spark lights up our darkness enough for us to be able to see that God is there. Then, we can then cry out from the depths of our soul: "Have mercy on me, O God!" or "Hasten, O God, to save me! Come quickly, Lord, to help me!" And God in Christ Jesus, through the Holy Spirit can do the rest.

This is the point of metanoia. This is the moment we turn away from despair and back toward God. And what is the outcome? Heaven sings for joy!

AMEN.