

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Lec. 24 – September 14, 2025

Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

New Song Episcopal Church

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I heard a story recently about a husband and wife who moved to a new home.

The first morning, as they were having breakfast, the wife looked out the window and saw her neighbor's linens and clothes hanging from the clothesline.

She noticed how dirty they looked and commented, "Someone should really teach them how to do their laundry." Wash day after wash day, this woman would look out at the clothesline and lament how the neighbors didn't know how to properly wash their clothes. One day the wife came out and couldn't believe her eyes. The sheets hanging on the neighbor's clothesline were pristinely white. With satisfaction, she said,

"Someone must have finally taught them how to do their laundry."

The husband replied, "I got up early and washed the windows."

In Luke's gospel, Jesus challenges the way that we see things. In his mind, the status quo, our comfortable view of reality, needs to be questioned, to be shaken up, and ultimately, needs to be transformed. In Luke, this challenge often plays out featuring two groups of characters: the Pharisees and scribes, who are the devoutly religious of the day, and the tax collectors and sinners.

This challenge often occurs at a meal where social status and Jewish law take center stage.

On two different occasions in Luke, Jesus calls tax collectors to follow him and ends up dining in their homes. In Levi's home, the Pharisees and scribes complain about Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus says that those who are sick are the ones who need a physician. Thus, he has come to call sinners to repentance and not the righteous. After dining at Zaccheus' home, Zaccheus sells half of his possessions to the poor and pays back

those he has defrauded four times what he owes them.

Then, Jesus tells a story about a Pharisee and a sinner praying at the temple.

The Pharisee prays, “God, thank you that I am not like these other people especially the tax collector,” and recounts his good deeds. The sinner, not even lifting his eyes to heaven, beats his breast and prays, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

In this same vein, we hear Jesus’ interaction with the Pharisees and scribes in today’s gospel as Jesus again shares a meal with tax collectors and sinners.

When the grumbling begins, Jesus tells them a series of three parables:

the lost sheep and the 99, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. The listener is asked, “Who wouldn’t leave 99 sheep in the wilderness to go search for one that had gone astray?” Well, I’m no shepherd, but I doubt that any shepherd worth their salt would leave the whole herd alone in the wilderness and risk losing them all. And why would you gather friends & neighbors to celebrate finding just one sheep?

Then, there is the woman who’s lost one of her ten coins. Upon finding it, would she invite everyone to a celebration & thus, end up spending far more than that one coin? With these stories we see the ridiculous and extravagant mercy of God. God sees the person who is lost as being so precious, of such great value, that God will do whatever it takes to get the person back. Be it combing the wilderness or expending time and energy to sweep the house. Or in the story of the prodigal son, the father’s willingness to make an absolute fool of himself as he runs to greet his sinful son and welcome him home.

In all three scenarios, there is celebration over what was lost being found, over the sinner repenting. One sinner turning from her old ways & being transformed is reason enough for all of heaven to rejoice. Jesus then deftly adds that far more rejoicing occurs over one sinner repenting

than over 99 righteous people who feel that they need no repentance.

The question for us is where do we see ourselves in this story? How is Jesus using this story to speak to us? Where I would prefer to see myself is in the lost sheep and the lost coin. I take great comfort in the thought that when I am lost, when I have chosen poorly and gone astray, God relentlessly will pursue me.

Out of great love, God will search & search until I am found and brought back into the fold. Where I don't want to see myself in the story is in the position of the Pharisees and scribes. And so, I must ask myself: Who do I grumble and complain about? Who don't I want Jesus to dine with? Who, in my book, is not worthy of Jesus' attention and love? Who is too great a sinner to receive God's mercy?

The news of this last week has been difficult and horrific. Yet another political assassination in our country, the earlier ones targeting Democratic lawmakers in Minnesota, this last one targeting Charlie Kirk, a well-known right-wing activist and influencer in the MAGA world. Before last Wednesday, I'll admit that I wasn't very familiar with Charlie Kirk, only vaguely remembering him as a speaker at the Republican National Convention. Since then, I have learned far more about his beliefs and ideology which he shared through his organization, Turning Point USA, his books, podcast, and the debates that he hosted on numerous college campuses.

As an evangelical Christian, Charlie Kirk espoused a number of controversial views; namely, his opposition to gun control, abortion, and LGBTQ rights; his criticism of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Martin Luther King Jr.; and his promotion of Christian nationalism, COVID-19 misinformation, the Great Replacement conspiracy theory and false claims of election fraud in 2020.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which studies hate speech in the U.S., described Charlie Kirk's rhetoric as "divisive, racist, xenophobic, and extreme."

His murder this last week was tragic; just 31 years old, a husband, father, son, brother. I, like so many of you, was horrified that another human being had been brutally killed.

What surprised me at his death was the utter devastation and outpouring of grief from some of my evangelical Christian friends online. They lauded Charlie Kirk as a bold and faithful voice for Christ, a defender of truth, a man who loves the Lord, who stands on the morals and the traditional values of the Bible. In many circles, he is now being heralded as a martyr.

I found this to be utterly perplexing. I was amazed at how their view of Charlie Kirk and his ideology and my view of him were worlds apart.

In preparing for the sermon this week with all this swirling in the background, I couldn't help but wonder how differently our Christian communities might interpret this gospel passage on the lost sheep and lost coin.

Who would they cast as the Pharisees and scribes? Who would they see as the tax collectors and sinners that were lost and in need of repentance?

I imagine that in some churches, the lost, the sinners might be identified as the LGBTQ community, those they consider to be the woke Left and perhaps violent, drug-dealing immigrants that are ruining our country.

The faithful would be encouraged to pray that the lost be found by God, that these sinners repent of their wicked ways, learn the truth, and follow Jesus in the right way.

People like me might be tempted to cast Christian nationalists as the Pharisees and scribes with their grumbling and complaining about the company that Jesus chooses to keep. If Jesus were with us today surely, he would reach out to the immigrant, the transgender youth, the person of color discriminated against in our society, and those imprisoned.

In both groups of churches, the preacher undoubtedly would speak with great conviction, convinced that they were speaking the truth and taking a stand against injustice and evil that they see in our society. Yet, I'm not sure how our messages couldn't conflict with each other any more than they do.

How can we all be following the same Lord?

Is my neighbor's laundry dirty? Are my windows in need of cleaning?

Could both their laundry and my windows be dirty? Who knows.

I don't have good answers to these questions. But these are the questions with which I wrestle when trying to talk to the evangelical Christians in my life.

If I am totally honest, I usually try to avoid the conversation altogether because our theology and worldviews seem so very far apart.

When do I need to speak boldly of the welcoming and all-inclusive love that I have experienced in God? When do I need to be wary of my self-righteousness and my assumed spiritual superiority?

Can I look for places where we do agree and where we can work together and celebrate our shared efforts?

No matter how we see things and where we find ourselves in this story from Jesus, God relentlessly will pursue us. Whether we've become lost in the falsehoods we believe or lost in our self-justification, our Lord will not rest until he finds us and brings us back to the fold. With that, there is great hope for us all.

This extravagant love from God has the power to transform us.

May the angels in heaven have great cause to rejoice.

May all who seek to follow Jesus be found by him  
and changed by his love.