

RECEIVE LOVE

Palm Sunday
Luke 15: 1-7

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

So he told them this parable: "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? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 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.' 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."

On this Palm Sunday, we watch Jesus ride headlong into Jerusalem to the hosannas of the people. We remember that he came to the city to save the lost. Jesus was familiar with crowds. He once described the weary and scattered crowds of people as wandering sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:36), and he had compassion on them.

Not long before he came riding into Jerusalem, Jesus had visited the home of the sinful tax collector Zacchaeus. That visit moved Zacchaeus to repentance, and Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house. ... For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk 19:9-10).

And the hosannas we hear this Palm Sunday, each one cries out, "Save us, we pray!" or even "Salvation has arrived!" The word began as a cry for help (Psalm 118:25) and later became a celebration of God's moving among his people to save them. Let there be no mistake, the figure riding into the city on a little donkey, he is all about saving the lost. That is why he came. That is why, within a week, he will die.

Palm Sunday reminds us that where the lost are sought and found there will be celebration. This was the central meaning of Jesus' parable of the lost

sheep and of the other two parables of the lost in Luke 15. The scribes and Pharisees simply found no joy in seeing a sinner repent. They were more committed to judging sinners and thanking God they were not among them. So Jesus tells the story of a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep behind to chase after one lost sheep, and when he finds the sheep, he lifts it to his shoulders with joy and brings it home so that the whole family and village can rejoice with him.

A pastor from Wisconsin tells the story of his church's first living nativity scene with costumed characters and live animals, including four sheep. Unfortunately, the fence around the stable that first year was not built high enough, and, sure enough, the lead sheep leaped over the fence and the other three followed. The pageant underway was now interrupted as the pastor and several others took off after the sheep. He went after the lead sheep and shouted instructions as to who would chase after which sheep.

About half a mile up the frontage road of a major highway, the pastor tackled that sheep into a huge snow drift. Remembering the pictures of the shepherd in Jesus' parable, he then attempted to lift the sheep on his shoulders, but the sheep was so heavy the pastor wrenched his back and lay in the snow drift clinging to that wayward sheep until help came. Two others came and helped him get that sheep home. What the pastor remembers most, though, is how that little crowd of people from the church and neighborhood joined in cheers and muffled glove applause as each sheep was returned to the fold. It was a picture of the Church at its best, he said, working together, clumsily, not without pain, to bring home the lost, and then rejoicing over each sinner who repents.

We in the Church are always at risk in losing our hosanna center or chorus. We can begin to believe that we have no need for repentance. We can forget the sheer joy of being saved ourselves. We can become known for judging sinners rather than welcoming them. In our self-righteousness, we can expect that only good people, people like us, belong in our churches. We can get caught in our hypocrisy. We can become a church serving ourselves instead of those who are lost and scattered, wandering outside our walls without a

shepherd.

If the Church is to claim Christ's mission of seeking the lost in our generation, it will be because each of us sees our self in that one lost sheep lifted atop Jesus' shoulders, secure only in his strength and care. What's more, we will watch this Good Shepherd shoulder a cross in our place, laying down his life for each one of us. Then we will cry out for the world today and for the next lost sheep we meet, "Hosanna! Save us, we pray! Salvation has arrived!"

Jesus has sent us to seek and to save the lost. That is why we are here. When just one sinner repents, our celebration, our communal joy, is rich, heartfelt and in the company of angels. So whose rescue will we celebrate next? It may come in a baptism or in the first-person-singular witness of one who tells her story of rescue. Each lost sheep now safe at home is worth a celebration—especially when one considers the cost. Amen.

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