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As Jesus Did, We Seek the Lost

People are precious to Jesus, all of them. He makes no distinction between the good and the not-so-good. He wants all people to find forgiveness and security in his love. In today's Gospel, Jesus illustrates his deep concern for people and the joy he and heaven experience when those who were lost are found. He encourages us to join in the search and to join in the joy.

Sermon **Luke 15:1-10**

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Introduction – If you followed the news at all this past week, you know that Queen Elizabeth II died on Thursday. During the days ahead hundreds of thousands will walk past her coffin to pay their respects and hundreds of millions will watch her funeral on television next Monday. It's all kind of strange in a way. Queen Elizabeth had almost no political power and she wasn't a spell-binding orator. She had no Hollywood image. She didn't win World War II; Winston Churchill did that. She didn't save the British economy; Margaret Thatcher did that. What seems to make Elizabeth II so endearing to the British and really to people all over the world was her consistency and her steadiness. For 70 years the queen was there through thick and thin. The world around her changed enormously, but she never changed much. The leather purse, the matching hat, the charming smile—people came to count on it and they came to count on her.

There is something about consistency that attracts us, don't you think? There's not much of it in our world. Restaurants change, fashions change, even morals change. People don't always sing the Star-Spangled Banner at sporting events anymore. So when we see something that is consistently reliable, it gives us a good feeling: the hardware store you can always trust or the farmers' market that always sells great sweet corn. Consistency gains our respect and it earns our loyalty.

Trouble is that the Queen has died and inevitably the hardware store and fruit market will close. The Gospel for this morning shows us a consistency that never dies and never ends. No matter where he went and who he saw, Jesus was always searching, always looking, always seeking people who needed what he had to give. Jesus went searching for the down and out, he went searching for the high and mighty. He went searching for you and me and he is still searching for people we know and people we don't know. When it comes to searching for the lost, Jesus is absolutely consistent.

The royal theme this week is going to be to remember and imitate Queen Elizabeth's consistent service for 70 years. We can do the same, not for a dead Queen but for a living Savior. The Gospel for today encourages us to

Learn to Love the Searching Heart of Jesus

The bottom feeders in Israel were always looking to get close to Jesus. This isn't the first time that Luke tells us that **the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus**. They didn't have much to offer. The tax collectors were notorious cheats and the sinners—well, you name the sin, they probably had committed it. They came to Jesus because he spoke to their needs. They were guilty and they knew it. Jesus offered freedom from guilt and they believed it. They were lost but Jesus searched them out and found them.

You've heard enough sermons to know something about the Pharisees. The Pharisees kind of redefined the term pious. They were pious on steroids and they had no use for the simple, the sinners, and the slaves. They had no use for Jesus, either, but they liked to follow him and speak their disapproval: **This man welcomes sinners and eats with them**. In their world you never invited sinners into your home and you never, ever shared supper with them.

Jesus told them a story: **Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?** Well, of course. That made sense to them. Sheep were money back then and you couldn't afford to lose even one. Every one counted—that's why the shepherds counted their sheep. If one was missing, the shepherd would go out at night without a flashlight, walk on the rocks, wade in the streams. **And when he finds it, Jesus kept the story going, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders—at least 150 lbs.—and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'** That made sense to the Pharisees; makes sense to us, too.

Another story: **Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.'** The Pharisees could understand that, too. A silver coin wasn't worth that much, just a day's wages. But it was important to her; 10% of your savings always means something. 10% is 10%.

So Jesus had these Jews in his hip pocket. He set up two practical scenarios which made perfect sense to them. They would have searched for the lost sheep and they would have searched for the lost coin. And then Jesus delivered the punchline: **I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent**. And then he repeated it: **In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents**. If you believe that every sheep in the fold counts, why wouldn't I search for every lost soul—even these lesser lights that you despise? If you accept that every coin has value, why wouldn't I search even for tax collectors and sinners? If everyone counts, why wouldn't I search for them? Why wouldn't you?

You get the point. Every one of these people had value to Jesus; every person counted: the tax collectors who used to cheat; the prostitutes who sold their body; the father who never took his son to the synagogue. All these sinners were precious to Jesus. He knew them all by name: Matthew, Mary, Zacchaeus. And he never stopped searching for them.

He knew the Pharisees by name, too. Ishmael and Jonah and Benjamin. He knew they despised him and demeaned him but he actually was telling these stories to them. Their arrogance and self-righteousness made them just as lost as the tax collectors and sinners. But each one was important to Jesus; each one had value. And Jesus was searching for them.

Jesus came searching us, too. We don't often think of ourselves as lost. Most of us have been found for as long as we can remember. But think about this. Most of your ancestors came to America because they wanted to worship freely in a Lutheran Church. That was Jesus searching for you. As you sat in confirmation class you wondered if all the time and effort was really worth it. Then your pastor said something that made you realize how important this was. That was Jesus searching for you. A tragedy entered your life and it was so devastating that it almost led you to despair. Then a friend put an arm around you and repeated the promises of God. That was Jesus searching for you. Once we all were lost or at least we were wandering. But each one of us is important to Jesus; he knows us all by name; we all have value to him. And every day Jesus is ready to begin his search to keep us close to him.

Whether we are notorious sinners feeling our guilt, arrogant church members looking down on others, or plain and simple believers like the worshipers here today, Jesus is always searching and seeking. You have to say this about Jesus: he is nothing if not consistent. And we learn to love that searching heart of Jesus.

The black mom with three kids fathered by different men; the college student struggling with his sexual identity; the neighbor who swears like a sailor; the church goer caught with pornography—we may mutter about them and think little of them. But they are not nameless to Jesus. He paid the price for each one of them. He took all their sins to the cross. He is willing to seek them out as he was willing to seek us. Will you be the voice of Jesus to them? The children who have fallen away from church, the spouse who wants little to do with God, the dear neighbor who has no idea of forgiveness and no hope of life with God. We love them and think much of them. We know their names as well as our own. They are not nameless to Jesus, either. Each one has value and Jesus searches and seeks each one. Will you be the voice of Jesus to them?

Learn to love the searching heart of Jesus. Take on that searching heart and reach out, as Jesus did consistently, and go searching for the lost. Amen.