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Pentecost 16

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Searching, Finding, Rejoicing God”

Text: Luke 15:1-10 (Ezekiel 34:11-24)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Most things that get put in any “Lost and Found” box never get found, or claimed. Most of the time the loss is chalked up to experience, and we move on.

When a pet gets lost or runs away, we search for it for a while, driving around in the rain, calling out its name, and even putting up little posters with pictures and descriptions, but how long do our efforts last? Sooner or later we resign ourselves to the loss and move on.

These days if something electronic breaks, we no longer try to get it fixed – it costs too much. We simply throw it away and buy a new one, which is better anyway.

And how many of us stop and stoop down to pick up that penny we find on the ground? Or do we just walk over it, because it’s not really worth our time and energy? Maybe if it was *a dollar* or something . . .

That’s how we are, in this day and age.

But today, Jesus wants you to understand a very simple, but very important point: **God isn’t like that! He isn’t like us.** He searches for every lost sheep and stoops for every lost coin. He never resigns Himself to accept the loss, and never just moves on. He never thinks 9 out of 10, or even 99 out of 100, is good enough. And He considers no price too high a price to pay in order to save us from the brokenness of our sin, and restore us as new with His forgiveness. That’s who our God is. That’s how great His love. And as one pastor (Rev. Charles Lehmann) who I read recently wrote about this: *You’re just going to have to deal with it!*

Because the truth is that we want our God to be more . . . well, reasonable. A God who acts more like how we think God should act! We want our God to be an awesome God, who reigns from heaven above! Unmatched in holiness and power, majestic and inspiring! On His throne, surrounded by angels doing His bidding! That's the kind of God we want to be with because, quite frankly, that's the kind of God we think we deserve. A God we're proud of and who is proud of us. An attractive God. A glamorous God. A high and sophisticated God. A God of big, impressive churches and full sports arenas. Of holy people doing holy things. A God who people see and just want to be around. . . . But a God who is like a man scrambling around in the arid Palestinian wilderness, desperately looking for one lost sheep? Or like a pitiful woman on her hands and knees, scraping the dirt floor of her home, grubbing around for an insignificant coin? Isn't that *beneath* God? Who wants a God like that? A God who acts so desperately, and shamefully?

And so the Scribes and Pharisees criticized Jesus when they saw Him acting like that, "*receiving sinners and eating with them.*" He may claim to be God or a prophet from God, but if He was He wouldn't be grubbing around like that, with tax collectors and sinners! That's like the President joining the grass mowing crew in front of the White House, with big ol' baggy shorts and black socks with his sneakers! Or like the Pope helping to sweep up St. Peter's Square after Easter services. It's just not done. Oh, maybe for a "photo op," but not *really*. That's beneath them. That's beneath God and His holiness, isn't it?

Well apparently not! For Ezekiel foretold the day when God would do just that: come and search for His sheep and seek them out. Bringing back the strayed on His shoulders, binding up the injured, and strengthening the weak. "*My servant David,*" God called Him through Ezekiel, even though Ezekiel lived hundreds of years after King David had come and gone. He was referring to the One David, the shepherd made king, would *foreshadow*. The One from "the house and lineage of David" (Lk 2) who would fulfill God's promise to David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne and whose kingdom would never end. (2 Sam 7) And that day came when God Himself came into this world *literally on His hands and knees*, in a manger-crib that night in Bethlehem, visited by who else but shepherds and kings. And in His coming *not* lowering His divine nature, but raising our human nature.

And it was the poor people, the afflicted and the distressed, who understood that! They saw Jesus for who He was, and **rejoiced!** Calling out for mercy to the “Son of David.” (Mt 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30; 21:9) The high and strong and rich saw Him too, and **grumbled.** And sometimes so do we. Thinking some are beneath forgiveness and not worth saving. Not worth the effort. The Hitlers and Saddams of this world. What about abortionists? But also even those less popularly notorious, but who have hurt us personally. We mutter over forgiveness given, and resent death bed conversions, as if they are not good enough. Losers just trying to get something out of a nothing life. And thinking that way, we act like those sheep Ezekiel talked about, pushing with side and shoulder; pushing away from the feed trough those we consider *less worthy* than we . . .

Stop grumbling and repent. For you are not worth as much as you think . . . **but you are also worth more than you think.** For the Son of God not only came into this world on His hands and knees to search for *others*, but to search for you. And to go the cross to die for you, for the guilt of your sins. For the truth is that we’re dying of hate as well as cancer; of despair as well as disease; and our stubborn, self-righteous pride threatens us just as much as any murderer’s bullets or terrorist’s bombs. And so we too cry out: *Son of David, have mercy on us!*

And He does. Coming into our world of sin, coming into *your* life of sin, to be *your* Saviour. Coming in Holy Baptism, and in those waters putting you on His shoulders on the cross (Rom 6), carrying you through the valley of the shadow of death with Him (Ps 23), and bringing you out to life again in His resurrection (1 Cor 15). Coming with His word of absolution, applying cross and baptism to your life today. And coming still, searching and saving, finding and forgiving, where we might least expect it: in the wilderness of the Sudan, the tundra of Siberia, jail cells, hospital rooms, and even grubbing around in rented 7th Day Adventist buildings. For what is worthless and insignificant in the eyes of the world is anything but to God. And those the world considers disposable, your Saviour considers worth His own body and blood. Take eat, take drink. Your sins are forgiven. Go in peace.

An old Jewish proverb says: “*There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world.*” Sometimes we think of God that way, and the world that way. Yet how different we see God today, where the joy in heaven is over one sinner who repents! (Think: Times Square, New Year’s Eve, only bigger!) How different is the

God whose *joy* was to come on His hands and knees, to get down and dirty, and to get those hands and feet pierced for us, *that whoever believe in Him would not perish, but have eternal life.* (Jn 3:16) How different the God who rejoices over us far out of proportion to what we are worth! Rejoicing over one found sheep when he still has 99. Holding a party that costs more than the coin that was found.

I'm sorry! ☺ That's your God, your Saviour. That's how much you are loved. *And you're just going to have to deal with it!*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.