

As we approach fall yet again, we look forward to football resuming. We welcome students from preschool to graduate school. We look forward to crisp autumn air, apple cider, and the leaves changing color.

The Sunday following Labor Day has traditionally been Christian Education Sunday. Today Sunday school resumes after summer break. We welcome Sunday school students. We commission the Sunday school teachers. We bless students as they start another school year.

Our appointed text from Luke 15 isn't so much about Christian Education as it summarizes the key message of Christianity. This is why we have Christian Education Sundays so we can learn more deeply the message contained in Luke 15 that is fleshed out throughout Scripture. The message is this: **WE REJOICE WHEN THE SHEPHERD FINDS LOST SHEEP.**

Luke 15 contains three parables or stories of Jesus that are known as the lost parables. There's the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. The parable of the prodigal son is perhaps the most familiar of all these accounts. It's also the longest and most detailed. Today, we're going to focus on the parable of the lost sheep. **“So [Jesus] 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?”**

Our first point, I. Sheep wander and go astray. One online source outlines three major reasons why sheep would stray from the flock: fear, following, and failures.

Our first reason: fear. When sheep are afraid, their flight response kicks in. This means a sheep can run away from the flock if they sense danger. They can also give themselves space from the flock to give them room to run if a threat appears. This fear can come from a negligent sheep dog or shepherd.

Of course, you didn't come here for tips on raising sheep. Why might people avoid the community that is the Church? Fear might play a role. As the flock sins against each other, unresolved hurts drive us apart. Soon a sheep who separates herself from the community loses sight of the flock. There's a fear of the unknown, many people are afraid that they'll be treated like a stranger if they attend a worship service. Threats of persecution from inside the church and outside the church make people hesitant to associate with an institution that is seen in an increasingly hostile light. Negligent and corrupt pastors and church leaders may have driven many away from the church. Perhaps you've been burned before and are unsure whether you can trust people in the Church.

Our second reason sheep stray: false following. Sheep are followers to a fault. If one sheep strays, one or two may follow that sheep. On this Christian Education Sunday, we need to understand that all of us are being taught. The question becomes, who is your teacher?

There are many good teachers and good things to learn outside of the four walls of a church or outside of the pages of the Bible, but I think we need to be aware that there are many forces tempting us to stray from the flock. We are tempted to follow friends who would rather spend Saturday night partying than in Church Sunday morning. We are tempted to follow celebrities and social media influencers who seek after the finer things of this life rather than where the true treasure lies. We may follow family members who never paid much heed to what goes on at church. Who is your teacher?

Our third reason sheep stray: failures. Sheep have amazing peripheral vision which is helpful for spotting predators, but they have a hard time seeing what's in front of them. They can easily lose the flock by wandering away to inspect something in front of them. Likewise, sheep have a hard time walking straight, which contributes to them easily getting lost without a guide.

We too can stray. There are so many distractions. We lose sight of the big picture. We can get trapped in sins that move us away from the flock. Week after week we return to church as sheep who have strayed in the previous week and are in need of forgiveness.

Yet despite the many temptations and ways that sheep can get lost, II. The shepherd seeks and finds the lost sheep. Our parable tells us that the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine sheep to seek out the one sheep that was lost. For many of us, losing one sheep would be a tax write-off. No need to risk the other ninety-nine to seek out the lost one.

Yet we read, “**And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.**” This shepherd has great zeal in seeking that sheep and finding it. This shepherd has great joy in finding this sheep. In baptism we can say, “I am Jesus’ little lamb.” The shepherd has claimed us in baptism. Yet as we mentioned before, the baptized often stray. There are baptized people who are lost. There are other lost people who have not yet come to faith in Jesus.

Yet in this parable we see the love of the shepherd for those who are his. For me or you, a lost sheep might be a tax write-off. But for Jesus, he has skin in the game. He died for the sins of the whole world, and that lost sheep cost him his suffering, pain, and death.

You are that sheep that Jesus sacrificed everything to have. You are the lost and condemned sinner that Jesus carries on His shoulders back into the fold. You were lost but have been found. You were separated from the flock, but have been reunited by the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Today is the day to reconsider the church. Today is the day to cast away all fear and take a leap of faith. The next four years of your life are going to look a lot

different as a part of the flock that is the Church rather than lost in the wilderness of sin.

Understand that perfect love casts out fear. In Christ, we have perfect peace and need not fear. We can put past hurts behind us and forgive those who have wronged us. We can seek out pastors and church leaders who will serve us and not harm us.

Christ is the Good Shepherd, and He will never lead you astray, although many false shepherds will. “Though all the world forsake the Lord, me and my house will serve the Lord.” No matter what the world around us may do, the Good Shepherd promises to lead us beside still waters and in paths of righteousness.

Understand that there is abundant forgiveness for those who have strayed. It’s never too late to re-join the church and start a new chapter of your life. Our text starts, “**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.**” Jesus sinners doth receive, and you qualify!

On this Education Sunday, we see that the Shepherd sends out helpers to seek and save the lost. He sends a pastor to care for and feed the flock. He sends Sunday school teachers to aid in that ministry of teaching us the timeless truths of God’s people. He sends family and friends to encourage and teach us in our Christian walk. How many of us have been transformed because a Christian mentor took the time to seek us out when we were going astray?

From the Sunday worship gathering flows many education opportunities. We have Sunday school which follows the worship service. We have midweek Bible studies with college group Wednesday nights and men’s and women’s study Thursday at nine and noon. We have confirmation Wednesday nights as well as other opportunities.

III. The shepherd calls friends and neighbors to rejoice. Our text concludes, “**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.’**” Filet mignon is good, but I’d rather have hamburgers with friends than filet mignon alone.

This shepherd is not content to celebrate alone. He calls together his friends and neighbors and rejoices with them. As we gather week after week, we rejoice as we welcome one another, sheep lost and found. We celebrate as we welcome back those who we haven’t seen in a while. We give thanks as we remember all that the Good Shepherd has done for us, and how he continues to do so much more than we can ask or imagine.

As the busy-ness of a new school year commences, let us always take time to rejoice with our friends and neighbors here in this place as we continue to proclaim his marvelous deeds!