

## **Luke 15:1-10**

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my lost sheep.’ 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.

“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”\*

## **Signs of the Times - The Peace of Christ** - September 11, 2022

*Luke 15:1-10*

Today, September 11, 2022, marks the sad anniversary of the attacks on our nation by the terrorist group known as al-Qaeda. This day, which we will always remember as “9-11” marked a tremendous turning point in world history. It is not at all difficult to speculate that our lives in 2022 would be markedly different now had the attacks not happened. On that horrible day, 2,977 people were killed, 19 hijackers committed murder–suicide, and more than 25,000 others were injured.

As a consequence, our nation declared war on Afghanistan, host to al-Qaeda. Once there, we found ourselves embroiled in a civil war which is still going on. There were 2,456 United States military deaths in the War in Afghanistan and 20,752 American service members wounded in action during the war. That’s just the American side. Estimates top 200,000 Afghans killed and hundreds of thousands more wounded during a war the US just recently quit. The Afghanistan invasion was quickly followed by another invasion of Iraq, during which over 6000 US soldiers were killed and probably 200,000 plus Iraqis killed.

There have certainly be other wars as well since 9-11, some also involving the US, others not. Most notably, of course, is the current war between Russia and Ukraine where so far well over 20,000 soldiers have died on both sides and millions of lives have been directly disrupted. The war has in part caused energy prices to soar and has threatened food shortages in Africa and elsewhere.

War is Hell. The deaths, the injuries, the unpredictable side effects ripple all over the world.

Yet we keep doing it, don’t we? Some nation is always at war with another nation every single day. And that’s just formal, official war. The daily shootings of innocent civilians on streets, at schools, and in shopping centers — aren’t those examples of war also? Each year, more people die and are injured by guns in the United States than the total number of soldiers killed and injured in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars combined! We remember, rightly, the 9-11 event and salute those who defended our country. Yet, we do nothing to commemorate the victims of the endless parade of gun deaths and injuries. Another shooting on the news? So what! There’ll just be more tomorrow.

Where is peace? When is peace? Perhaps most importantly, what is peace?

For Christians, the concept of peace is a huge challenge and a paradox. We worship Jesus Christ as the “Prince of Peace.” We listen to his words commanding us to “turn the other cheek” and to “walk the extra mile” to shame our enemies. We remember how Jesus died, quietly, accepting his fake trial and horrible crucifixion as a victory not a defeat, because we believe in Christ, life conquered death.

Yet the Church that worships the Prince of Peace is the same Church that over the centuries has actively marched in crusades in the Middle Ages. It is the same Church that encouraged European armies to invade, capture, and kill millions of Africans, Asians, and Native Americans in the name of Jesus! It is the same Church that pitted Catholic against Protestant in numerous wars, the most recent being in Northern Ireland.

Every time our nation considers war, there is always a vigorous debate about what Jesus would do. Yet, time and again, the Christian Soldiers march onwards, praying to God for victory over the enemy. Abraham Lincoln in his Second Inaugural Address remarked that both North and South, “read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully.”

We may rightly ask, given how wedded the Church is to war and how often the Church fails to follow the example of Jesus Christ, whether I as a pastor have any business talking about peace. Am I not merely a hypocritical representative of a hypocritical Church? What gives me any standing at all to talk to folks about peace?

Friends, as a flawed, sinful human being, as an ordained pastor in a denomination which is quite proud of involvements in wars—especially the American Revolution, I am acutely aware that my personal efforts over the years to be engaged in making peace are, at best, incomplete. I can, should, and must do more.

And that starts with talking to you this morning about the complex and many-layered enigma we call peace.

In Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, one of the most powerful words for peace is the word, “Shalom.” When Jesus preached peace, in his mind he was preaching *shalom*. When Paul the Evangelist wanted to bless his hearers, he prayed that they may experience the *shalom* of Christ.

While indeed there are many layers to what we call peace, true peace, biblical peace, Christ's peace that begins with *shalom* is far more than merely existing without conflict. Rather *shalom* is a state of mind, a state of being which connects our very souls with God.

OK, now I'm getting weird. Connecting our very souls with God. What is that?

Friends, something I think we as a Church fail badly at is helping our members understand that our religion, our faith, is much more than just coming to worship on Sunday and perhaps asking for prayers when we are in trouble. God is not a memento or a picture book to be taken off the shelf every few months when we feel sentimental and then put back and forgotten for a few more months.

To know peace, real peace, inner *shalom*, means being in a constant relationship with God that never stops. True inner peace is having an awareness of God wherever you are. I think, I hope, for example, that for most couples their relationships are such that each is thinking about the other throughout the day. When a partner makes a major decision, that decision is never made without considering its impact on the other.

Such is the relationship with God in Jesus Christ seeks with us. In other words, we gain peace, inner peace, true *shalom*, when embrace our God as a truly constant, faithful, loving, and supportive companion in all aspects of life. True *shalom* is when we feel emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually bound to God in a way that gives us the assurance that God is with us always. That doesn't mean we won't have problems. That doesn't mean life will be perfect. Quite the contrary, some of the most controversial people in history were able to say what they said and do what they did only because they had *shalom*. They had the true peace of knowing God.

And that is the critical first step toward knowing peace and being a peacemaker in this world. From a Christian perspective, it is impossible to work for peace in the larger world unless you are at peace with God and with yourself. No doubt, there are many people who go through the motions of peace. There are many people who do speak, march, act, and give in order to benefit others. However because they lack *shalom*, the inner peace that comes with knowing God and being in a relationship with God, they often can be highly dissatisfied with their lives. There are many pastors and other leaders who preach peace, but have no personal peace in their lives so their work becomes more difficult and they may eventually quit because they lack peace inside themselves.

In short, you can't be a peacemaker in the long run unless you yourself are at peace and have the peace that surpasses all understanding.

That's why today's parables from Jesus about the lost sheep and the lost coin are so relevant to making peace and being peacemakers.

Here we have two powerful stories about something being lost: a sheep and a coin. Somehow they got lost and the owners set out to find them. After much searching, the owners did find what they were looking for and there was much celebration afterwards. The parable is often used as an

illustration of the fact that God knows each one of us and loves us. God never gives up on us and will never stop searching for us. And God rejoices when we are found.

True peace, true *shalom*, is when we know in our heart of hearts, in our innermost being, that in all the circumstances of our lives we ourselves may on occasion actually be that lost sheep or that lost coin. I know all of us have felt not once but many times in life that we are truly lost. We have felt like life has abandoned us and nothing is going right —regardless of who or what is to blame. Such feelings are part of life and we will all experience them from time to time. Nevertheless, despite our sense of disconnection from the world, despite our belief that we may not belong or we don't fit in, we can have inner peace by never forgetting God is always with us, God is always calling to us, God is always searching for us in the bad times and even the good times. Of course we all want God to be with us in the bad times. But we often forget that during the good times, we sometimes delude ourselves by thinking we don't need God. Nonetheless, in the bad or in the good, God is there.

But now what? If we have inner peace, if we truly are living in God's *shalom*, what then? What do we do with it? Simple, we change the world.

Could Gandhi, could King, could Mandela and hundreds and thousands like them, could they have faced down governments, soldiers, and screaming crowds unless they first had the inner peace of truly knowing God is with them? Of course not.

Friends, when we look at Jesus' life, filled with turmoil, arguments, and ultimately resulting in his unjustified death we may well say to ourselves that we can't do what he did. When we remember that he called on us to turn the other cheek and love those who hate us, we may tell ourselves that we can't even do that, either. Jesus, you're just too hard to follow!

That's why true peacemaking does not come from our actions, but our spirits. Before any of us can go forth and challenge the evil forces shaping our society, we must fully believe that God does know us, God does love us, and God is always on our side. We must remember that God is looking out for us right now just as surely as the shepherd was looking for the lost sheep and the woman was searching for the lost coin. God is with us! And God is with you! Believe and make peace!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.