Sunday, September 17, 1989
WHEN HEAVEN REJOICES
Luke 15:1-10

I read somewhere recently that the mathematics shown in the Bible don't make much sense. This is especially true when one considers the parables Jesus told. Here are two examples before we consider in more detail the parables about the lost sheep and the lost coin, read earlier from Luke's Gospel.

There is a story about a farmer that seems to contradict all known laws of fairness, human motivation, and just compensation. Jesus tells us about a farmer who hires people to work in his fields. Some start at sunrise, some at the morning coffee break, some at lunchtime, some at the afternoon coffee break, and some an hour before quitting time. Everyone seems grateful for employment until payroll time, when those who worked all through the day under a blazing sun learn that the sweatless upstarts who put in barely an hour get exactly the same pay. Anyone who has worked in the fields for a full day can easily identify with their outrage. The boss's decision defies good economics.

I realize that Jesus told this parable not as a lesson on employee benefits, but on God's attitude toward us. But the mathematics seem just as odd in the spiritual realm. Those who worked only one hour remind me of the thief on the cross: a good-for-nothing who barely sneaks in under the wire and yet apparently gets the same reward as someone who has lived a lifetime of devotion and piety.

Tales of last-minute forgiveness or so-called deathbed confessions have a certain dramatic quality, but such stories also seem a bit unfair. How would you feel if you were raised in an upright Christian family, attended church regularly, and had established an exemplary home in the community, holding down a regular job, paying your bills on time, only to find that some Johnny-come-lately with a deathbed confessional is welcomed into heaven with more rejoicing than you received?

And there's that story of the prodigal son who goes off with his inheritance and spends the whole lot on liquor, sex, and fancy clothes until finally he doesn't have two cents left to rub together and has to go to work or starve to death. He gets a job on a pig farm and keeps at it long enough to observe that the pigs are getting a better deal than he is, and then decides to go home. There is no indication that he realizes he's been a fool and broken his dad's heart, no indication that he thinks of his dad as anything more than a meal ticket. He decides to go home for the simple reason that he knows he always got three meals a day there, and for an individual who is in danger of starving to death, that is reason enough.

So, he sets out on his return trip, and on the way, he practices the speech he hopes will soften up his dad enough so that at least he won't slam the door in his face. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Surely that should work.

However, his dad sees him coming home from a distance and starts running toward him like a madman. Before the boy has time to get so much as the first word out, the old man throws his arms around him and all but knocks him off his feet with his welcome.

The boy is back! That's all that matters. The lost has been found. Who cares why he's back? And the dad doesn't do what any other father would have been inclined to do. He doesn't say he hopes he has learned his lesson, or "I told you so." He doesn't say he hopes he is finally ready to settle down for a while and will find some way to make it up to his mother. He only says, "Bring him something to eat. Bring some warm clothes to put on." And then the dad calls all the household together with the neighbors for a big party.

Now let's look at the two parables we're considering today because they have the same theme. Here's a noble shepherd who left his flock of 99 and plunged into the darkness to search for one lost sheep. A nice story, but consider the underlying mathematics. Jesus says the shepherd left the 99 in the wilderness, which presumably means vulnerable to rustlers, wolves, or simply wandering away on their own.

In the story of the lost coin, one coin out of ten is discovered to be missing, and the woman searches for it until she finds it. In both cases, the one missing is as important, as valuable as those who are not missing — thus the search until the lost coin is found. The woman is so happy when she finally finds the lost coin that she calls in her neighbors for a big party.

In both cases, as in the story of the prodigal son, when the lost is found, there is a huge celebration to which everyone is invited.

When Jesus first told these stories about a lost sheep and a lost coin, he was responding to criticism that was being leveled against him by the religious authorities of his time. The main point of his critics was that Jesus spent too much time seeking out and being with the "lost" people in that society — the sinners and the outcasts, people who were considered by many to be of less value than the church-going, stalwart citizens of the community.

The critics of Jesus simply assumed that some people in society are worthless, they are lost forever, and it's a waste of time to go after them, try to save them, or to be in any kind of relationship with them.

These parables make two main points:

The first point is that God actively seeks out the lost. God takes the initiative. Not only are the accidental outcasts sought out, and when found, there is rejoicing (a coin gets lost through no fault of its own), but even those outcasts who cast themselves out, God seeks out, and when one is found, there is great rejoicing.
Jesus was presenting to the people of his time a radical new concept regarding the nature and love of God. These parables tell of the seeking love of God which will not give up on anyone. God will seek and search forever if necessary.

In the Hebrew mind of Jesus's time, and specifically in the minds of the scholarly listeners of Jesus, there was a certain order to things. A person repents; God responds with forgiveness.

The Scribes and Pharisees knew that and were, of course, pleased. For they had taken all the right steps and were in. It was interesting to look at those who were out. But of course, you only looked, you didn't talk with them, and you certainly didn't eat with them.

We all know about that order. If someone says, "I'm sorry," then we are maybe ready to forgive them. But do we ever seek out people and forgive them even before they ask?

That's what happened in these parables. The proper sequence is reversed. God doesn't wait for us to repent. God seeks us out. God goes after the lost. God forgives us even before we ask.

From a practical, common-sense point of view, this searching love of God takes a lot of foolish risks. In the parables, the shepherd was not a prudent person. He did not play the percentages. He left the 99 sheep in the wilderness, unprotected, while he went to search for the one lost sheep.

So to repeat the first point again — the love of God as expressed in Jesus seeks all people, no matter how lost or how worthless they might seem to themselves or to us. And this love of God never gives up until the lost are found.

The second main point of these two parables is this: All of us are called to rejoice in the finding of the lost. In the story in Luke, Jesus was calling on the Scribes and Pharisees to rejoice with him in the finding of the lost.
And Jesus carried it one step further. He said, "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Heaven itself rejoices when the lost are found. The joy is so great over the lost being found that it extends all the way to heaven.

Now let's make these parables more contemporary and ask: Who are the lost in our time? Who are the outcasts? Who among us are considered to have less value than others? Who are those we want to push aside and forget about?

From the point of view of many in our time, those who have AIDS are lost, and not only are they isolated from the rest of society, but many hope they stay lost. Yet I think Jesus would go after them and accept them as having worth as children of God, and he would want us to do the same.

People who are in jail or in prison are considered by many in our time to be lost forever. "Lock them up and throw away the key," is the attitude voiced by many. "Who cares how crowded the jails and prisons are. The people in them are not of much value anyway." What we are saying is that we don't care what happens to such people, and by implication that God doesn't care either. But that's not what Jesus said.

Even us, because we are members of a church like this one, are considered by some of our Christian sisters and brothers to be lost. They would say that we don't have the right beliefs, or that we don't express our faith with the correct formulations, or that we haven't been baptized properly.

There are severe divisions within the Christian Church. Some who are members of one brand of Christianity consider others who are of a different brand, lost and damned forever. Ironically too, within the Christian Church with all of its divisions, there are those who would eat a meal with you or me in our homes or in a restaurant, but would not be able, according to their church doctrine, to eat the Lord's Supper together with us in our worship service, or we with them in their worship service.

So, there are lots of lost people in today's world. Let's be personal for a moment. Is there anyone here who has not felt lost at one time or another? Whether or not anyone else considered you lost, you felt lost within yourself. You felt disconnected, completely isolated and

alone, or you felt that your life had no direction, that you were simply going through the motions of living.

Who are the lost in our time? Each one of us at one time or another is or has been lost. We can be lost in so many ways. Sometimes we are lost in the fog of fear, anxiety, and worry, and we grope frantically, even desperately, for a sure way to the level of clear vision.

Sometimes we are lost in the jungles of passion, hatred, and vengeance, and then we are unable to see others as they are, and we only react in spasms of uncontrolled fury.

Sometimes we are lost in the depression of grief because of the death of someone we love, and we live for a time with no sense of direction or meaning.

There are those who are lost in an addiction to drugs or alcohol. And there are those who are lost because of defeat and disappointment. Sometimes we get lost in our ambition to get ahead and we sell our souls.

Some people get lost simply by wandering off course gradually.

This matter of being lost touches every one of us. There are so many ways in which people can get lost.

Thus, the Good News of these parables is for all of us. These stories illustrate the seeking love of God which will not give up anyone for lost. And we who are followers of Jesus are to be among those who seek out the lost and rejoice when they are found.

One Spring, during heavy rains, a dike on the river began to leak badly, and it was reported that it would certainly give out completely within the next 24 hours. The town downstream was evacuated. The National Guard then began to search the town, now flooded, to be sure that no one was left behind.

Two of the Guardsmen came upon a man who was standing on his porch with water up to his knees. They asked him to get into their boat before the flood became worse. He refused by saying, “I will stay here. God has promised to take care of me.”

A few hours later, the man was on the roof of his house because the flood had increased, and again they urged him to get into their boat lest he be swept away by the flood. Again, he refused by saying, “God has promised to take care of me.”

Sometime later, when the flood had increased and the man was now hanging on for his life, a helicopter flew over and spotted the man. A rope was lowered to him so that he could be rescued. But once more he refused, stating that “God would save him.”

Not long after, he drowned. When this man arrived in God’s presence, he let God know how disappointed he was because God had not saved him. He told God, “You promised to take care of me.” God’s reply was: “You fool, I sent you two boats and a helicopter.”

God continually takes the initiative in seeking out the lost. And when the lost are found, the party begins. Even heaven rejoices, and all of us are invited to join in the celebration. Amen.