



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

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✠ **In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.** ✠

In today's Gospel – the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Housewife's Lost Coin – Jesus' subject is good guys and bad guys. He was preaching about publicans and sinners, who were regarded by virtually everyone in the Holy Land at the time as really bad guys, to an audience of scribes and Pharisees, who were -- surprising though it might seem -- almost as universally, regarded as very good guys.

Today, of course, we don't see these two sets of people that way at all. Today we think of the scribes and Pharisees as bad guys and the publicans and sinners as . . . well, if not good guys, at least as not such *bad* guys as the scribes and Pharisees.

Actually, this isn't at all fair. The scribes and Pharisees, by today's standards were truly excellent people. They were pillars of the church – pious folk who tried hard to lead upright lives; who strove to uphold all God's commandments. They praised the Lord. They loved their neighbors, and never wittingly missed an opportunity to give a helping hand to the deserving poor.

The publicans and sinners, by contrast, were despicable people – traitors both to their religion and their nation. They had cast their

religion and the Law of Moses aside to become willing collaborators with their Roman overlords.

Publicans were tax collectors of a particularly nasty type. They paid the Roman government a hefty fee for the right to collect taxes in a given area and any money they could collect over and above that fee was their profit. The more taxes they screwed out of the taxpayer, the more profit they made for themselves. It was an iniquitous but highly efficient system of revenue-raising.

Naturally, publicans routinely wrung more out of taxpayers than they actually owed. They had the whole weight of Roman law behind them and taxpayers had no means of resisting their demands. Not surprisingly, they were hated with a passion far greater than any disgruntled American taxpayer ever hated the IRS.

So how did the scribes and Pharisees end up as bad guys and the publicans as the good guys? The answer lies in the parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. Their message is that God loves the outcast, the despised and the criminal classes just as much as he loves respectable folks like our

selves. Not only that, God has given us – the scribes and Pharisees – the job of bringing them back into his fold.

The Parable of the Sheep defines Jesus' role as Savior. He's the owner of the sheep. The flock is the Church. The sheep who never go astray are the respectable folks: Pharisees, like us. The lost sheep are unrepentant sinners. The parable describes the Good Shepherd's love for unrepentant sinners – how he pleads with them to repent and how he rejoices when they do so. The lost sheep he brings home on his shoulders is the newly repentant sinner who has returned to a state of grace.

The Parable of the Lost Coin explains our role in the process of redeeming sinners. The woman is the Church and the 10 coins represent the souls in her keeping. The parable contains a lot of symbolism. For example, the lost soul is represented by a coin, an inanimate object, which implies souls are lost, at least in part by our – for that read the Church's -- negligence. Jesus is warning us that because the Church here on earth works through fallible human beings it is often negligent.

The parable explains how Jesus expects members of his Church to act. First, he expects us to cheerfully atone for our neglect and show as much love for the sinner as he does. He expects us to search energetically for lost souls. The lighting of the candle represents preaching the Gospel. In describing the elbow grease the woman puts into her sweeping the house for the lost coin, Jesus is telling us we must turn the world upside down until the last sinner has been brought back into the fold.

The trouble with this is we are all painfully aware how far we fall short of Jesus' standards. We aren't very loving towards outcasts, undesirables and the criminal classes. And nor were the scribes and Pharisees. Sure, they strove to be righteous. But they convinced themselves that keeping

their noses clean and obeying the law to the letter was enough. Confident of their own salvation, they looked down on people who didn't do as they did. In short, they were smug and self satisfied

The besetting sin of scribes and Pharisees was pride. They were charitable to the deserving poor. But their assumption of their own righteousness led them to be uncharitable to the genuinely lost sheep – the publicans and sinners. The scribes and Pharisees didn't even make a stab at ministering to these folk. And Jesus is pointing out that having an attitude like that means you are falling down on the job.

Jesus' message is that, measured against God's standards, all of us fall short – not just the sinners we really despise, but scribes and Pharisees like us. We are all so far from perfection that we are all in equal need of God's grace. Moreover, today's Christians have no right to look down on the scribes and Pharisees because they, in fact, are mirror images of our selves.

It's hard to feel much sympathy for drunks and drug addicts, pimps and prostitutes, crooked businessmen, corrupt politicians, mobsters and racketeers. Yet, says Jesus, these folks are lost souls like ourselves, and – stunning though it might seem – just as deserving of salvation as we are.

For the scribes and Pharisees, this was a really unpalatable message. But even more unpalatable was the news that God held them responsible for seeking out these horrible lost sheep and bringing them back to the fold. Jesus' message is no more palatable today than it was back then. But while we might not like it – while it might make us profoundly uncomfortable – it's the way God wants it. And what he says goes. *AMEN.*

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be  
Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power,  
Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***