

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL - 18 September 2022**  
**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C - Lectionary 24**

**1st Reading: *Exodus 32:7-14***

**Psalm *51:1-10***

**2nd Reading: *I Timothy 1:12-17***

**Gospel: *Luke 15:1-10***

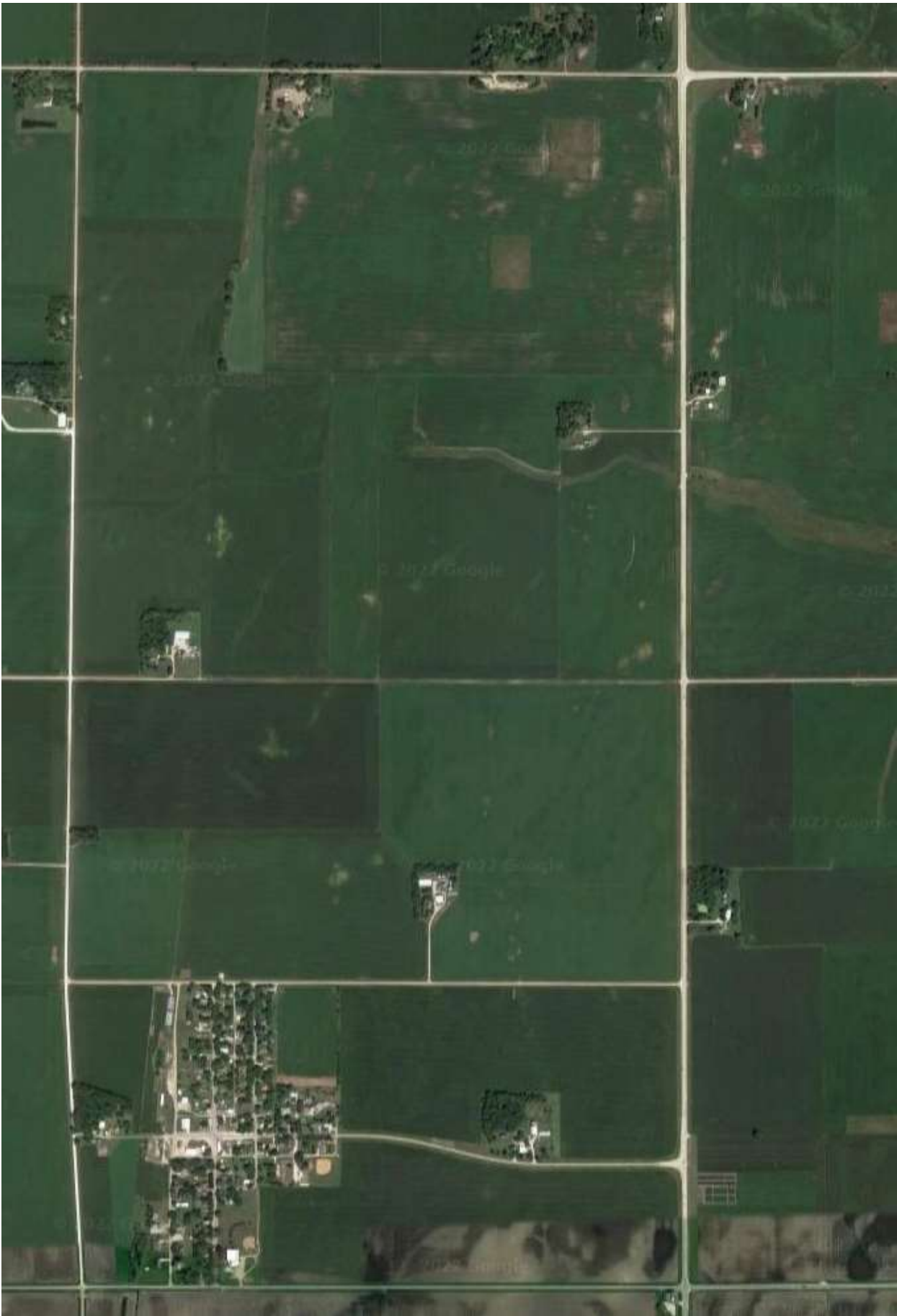
**Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø***

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Once upon a time there was an Iowa farm boy. That would be me. I hope you can see this satellite photograph. Down in the bottom left corner is my hometown of Rembrandt, Iowa. And straight north of it, half-a-mile away is our farm. My father was born on this farm. And I hope you can see the little wedge of green grass up at the top of the section north of our farm. It starts next to the other farm there, the Welmerling's farm. And if you follow that wedge of land, you might be able to see very faintly that it seems to continue right past our farm and then link to the town of Rembrandt. That's where the old railroad went.

Well, when I was in high school, my summer job was to walk beans. Some of you might know what that is. My wife, Coral, from Long Island, New York, was a bit bewildered as to what "walking beans" might mean the first time I mentioned it to her. It's really very simple. It just means that we walked through the soybean fields, pulling out weeds. So one hot sunny summer day, I was walking beans in that long field north of our farm and west of the grassy wedge, and there it was right in front of me, between the rows of beans: a sheep.

Oh, didn't I mention that Mr. Welmerling kept about a dozen sheep in that grassy wedge where the railroad used to go? I'd seen them, of course, from a distance driving past his farm. But here was one, close up and personal, blocking my path, and panting heavily in the hot sun.



Well, what was I to do? I could tell that she was in some distress. She seemed to be having trouble breathing down next to the ground with the beans crowding around her. Somehow, she had gotten out of the pasture and was lost in the bean field. I didn't know if I could coax her back in the right direction. I tried to nudge her, but she wasn't going anywhere - and that was the first time I realised how oily sheep wool is. So I decided to run back to our farm and tell my father about this poor creature.

I didn't participate in the rest of the rescue operation, but now when I consider Jesus' parable of the lost sheep, I can't picture Mr. Welmerling lifting her up on his shoulders and carrying her home. She was a full-grown sheep after all, so I don't know what technique they used to get her back to the pasture. But that night at supper, my father told me, "You did the right thing." For a staunch Norwegian farmer, that's about as much of a celebration as we were likely to get, and I rather doubt that Mr. Welmerling called all his friends together for a party to rejoice with him that his lost sheep had been found. But I know he was grateful that I had kept his sheep from suffocating or overheating and dying in the bean field.

And now here we are at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, and there's a very nice picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd for all of us to contemplate. And I can't help but think about that poor sheep, who had somehow gotten out of her pasture, and instead of shady trees and good munchy grass, found herself surrounded by unfriendly bean plants in the searing sun. And I suspect that she was rather happy to get back to her pleasant pasture, her companion sheep, and some good fresh water to drink.

Jesus compares us to such a lost sheep this morning. And I must admit that there are times when I have felt just as bewildered as she must have felt, in very unpleasant circumstances, wondering, "How did I get here?", and with no clue as to how to remedy the situation. If we think about that poor sheep, she had gotten herself into her own mess. No, she didn't really know what she was doing, but she did make the choice to go in the wrong direction, under the fence or however she managed to get into the bean field. And then there she was, without the wisdom of how to save herself.

We as human beings should have a little more sense than a sheep, but so often we don't use that sense. In our reading from Exodus, we see the people of Israel, who should have known better, crawling under their own fence and into trouble. There they were, right at Mount Sinai. God had spoken directly to them. They had seen his power. Only a few months earlier, they had seen the waters of the Red Sea part, and they had walked through on dry ground. But now Moses was a little late coming down from speaking to God on the mountain, and they couldn't wait. "Let's invent our own gods and worship them instead."

And it's so easy for us to read this story and say, "What was the matter with them?" And yet, we do just the same ourselves. We trust in money, or our own popularity, or power, or any of the other things that turn our eyes away from God, until we suddenly stop and realise that we have crawled under the fence, and we don't know where we are or how to get back to where we ought to be.

And then there is Paul, who writes this morning: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost."

Paul thought it was a good idea to drag Christians out of their homes and arrest them - a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. And where did that get him? Struck with blindness on the road to Damascus, helpless until Ananias came and prayed for him. Should Paul have known better not to persecute Christians? Well, yes, but we can certainly understand how he found himself doing so much damage instead of doing good. So we, too, find ourselves in distress, often by our own choices, even when we should know better.

But the point of all of our readings this morning is not to see how foolish we can be, the point is: What does God do about it? In the story in Exodus, it appears that God has decided to do away with all the foolish Israelites who have turned their back on him. But Moses steps in and changes God's mind. Or does he?

Did God really intend to destroy the whole people of Israel, or was he perhaps testing Moses to see what Moses would say? We know that Jesus did this from time to time. John tells us that when he fed the five thousand, he first tested his disciples to come up with the right answer, even though he already knew what he was going to do. And there are other examples as well.

So here God waits to see what Moses will say, and Moses implores God to have mercy. And we learn from this story, and from others in the Torah that God "shows steadfast love to thousands of those who love him". This is God's answer to our sins - to have mercy. Listen once again to what Paul wrote: "The grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

And so Jesus tells us in his parable this morning that when we go astray, he doesn't abandon us, he doesn't want to destroy us. Instead he goes well out of his way to rescue us. And when he finds any one of us and leads us back to him, all the angels in heaven rejoice.

He also compares God to the woman with the ten coins who has lost one. Now this isn't just a fun coin collection she had. The coin she had lost was a drachma, the wage for an entire day of work. She needed those coins to live on. It was vitally important that she find that coin. So she went to extreme measures to find it. She "lit a lamp, swept the house, and searched carefully until she found it".

So when we find ourselves lost, God doesn't just say, "Well, you deserved, didn't you?" Instead, he drops everything to hunt for us - under a dresser, in a bean field, or in the valley of the shadow of death. He takes whatever measures he needs to - even dying on a cross for each one of us - to bring us back to himself and to a shady, grassy pasture, where we can munch in peace forever. Nor is he content just to be glad himself about it. He calls together the whole host of heaven, angels and archangels, to rejoice that we have come home. Imagine that - the entire host of heaven rejoicing that you have been found by God and rescued by him!

Amen!

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