

Devotions for the Fourteenth Week after Pentecost, September 15-19, 2025

Monday of Pentecost 14 – Prayer of the Week

Lord Jesus, You are the Good Shepherd, without whom nothing is secure. Rescue and preserve us that we may not be lost forever but follow You, rejoicing in the way that leads to eternal life; for You live and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

There was a man who sat outside the grocery store in my neighborhood. He had a bucket on his head. He smelled very bad. He squatted on the sidewalk near the door, surrounded by a small mound of stuff, hurling threats and insults at anyone who came too close. He clearly had some form of mental illness. Did the mental issues lead him to the meth? Or did the meth push him over the edge? I don't know. I wish we could have gotten him into an appropriate residential treatment facility. But the county's mental health system was and remains overwhelmed. Most people just made a circle and walk on by. Is he lost forever? I have not seen him for some time.

There was another fellow who regularly "shopped" at that same grocery store. He loaded a shopping cart with beer and meat and bypassed the check stand on the way out the door. The staff were told not to pursue him or stop this. Company policy says they must let it happen in the interest of employee safety. He did this so often that the employees had a nickname for him, "The Modelo Goblin." Modelo beer being his beverage of choice. This man seemed to have lost all moral compass. He saw nothing wrong with stealing what has come to be thousands of dollars of merchandise from his neighbors. Was he lost forever? Had he indeed become something other than human, a goblin of sorts? I know that my society has called such a lost cause and largely given up on both of these men. I heard that he has since passed away.

We pray in this prayer this week that we are not lost forever but follow Jesus. This means he must rescue and preserve us. I do not think we really grasp how close we are to these unfortunates who frequent the grocery store in my neighborhood. Our world tells us to be authentic, and we often tell our youth to pursue their passions and dreams. Have both of these men followed that advice to their destruction? Praise God, we have a shepherd who is wise, loving, and strong. He alone is the hope of the two men I describe above and the many others who are like them. His rescue and help are what keep any of us from being lost forever. Listen to Him. Follow Him. He leads to eternal life.

Tuesday of Pentecost 14 – Ezekiel 34:11-24

¹¹ "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own

land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

¹⁷ “As for you, my flock, thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and male goats. ¹⁸ Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture; and to drink of clear water, that you must muddy the rest of the water with your feet? ¹⁹ And must my sheep eat what you have trodden with your feet, and drink what you have muddied with your feet?

²⁰ “Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: Behold, I, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹ Because you push with side and shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns, till you have scattered them abroad, ²² I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³ And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴ And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken.

I always remember a scowl on his face, but this may be my experiences interfering with my recollection. I was a young when my father served this parish. I honestly don't know what was going on with this man. I suppose he might have had a difficult childhood, a problematic marriage, a frustrated career, or something else. He also might have just been a very grumpy person by nature. Whatever the reason for his demeanor and behavior, it made life difficult for a lot of folks, including my father. Eventually his behavior became so egregious that the congregation took action and curbed his ability to disrupt voter's meetings and spread his vitriol through the membership. But that took a while, perhaps too long. I do believe that sometimes we are too patient with sinful behavior on the part of Christians. Can one be too nice?

I do not know why sometimes people turn the church into an arena where they can vent the bile of their hearts. I have been angered to see God's vulnerable sheep bullied and belittled by those who profess the same Christ, often in the name of things which Jesus has long since said were not that important, a color choice for carpet, a decision about a parking lot, or a change in the by-laws of the congregation. Not one person goes to heaven or hell over these decisions, but they can become occasions when the powerful thrust at the weak with their horns and push them aside. It muddies the clear water of God's loving care and tramples the nourishing fellowship of God's people into the mire.

Ezekiel, traumatized by the exile, sees the violence of the Babylonians showing up inside the community of God's people. Inspired by God's Spirit, he speaks God's judgment upon such behavior. God always sees those little and vulnerable people. His scales of heavenly justice

measure not so much the righteousness of our causes as the love by which we serve. He loves His flock and those who love them are praised and those who harm them are sternly warned (Mt. 18:6). He has established David's Son, Jesus, as our shepherd who does not fail them. Take a moment today to pray for the leadership of your parish, both pastoral, commissioned, and lay. Pray they have gentle hearts and loving words. Pray that God protects them and gives them strength and discernment to know when to discipline within the flock of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Wednesday of Pentecost 14 – Psalm 119:169-176

- ¹⁶⁹ Let my cry come before you, O LORD;
give me understanding according to your word!
- ¹⁷⁰ Let my plea come before you;
deliver me according to your word.
- ¹⁷¹ My lips will pour forth praise,
for you teach me your statutes.
- ¹⁷² My tongue will sing of your word,
for all your commandments are right.
- ¹⁷³ Let your hand be ready to help me,
for I have chosen your precepts.
- ¹⁷⁴ I long for your salvation, O LORD,
and your law is my delight.
- ¹⁷⁵ Let my soul live and praise you,
and let your rules help me.
- ¹⁷⁶ I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant,
for I do not forget your commandments.

There is an old proverb about when it is everybody's responsibility it soon becomes nobody's responsibility. We can walk by a problem day after day and say to ourselves that someone should really do something about that without ever imagining that we are that someone. It works the other way too. I think we often hear that famous verse from Isaiah 53 and to which Paul seems to allude in Romans 3, "All we like sheep have gone astray..." But too often I believe we have made that into an excuse for our lack of any moral improvement. Everyone is doing it, we reason, so I am not so bad. In effect we have said it is everyone's problem, so it is not really my problem.

That is why I think we need this last verse of Psalm 119. It is the longest chapter in the Bible and is a long and complicated poem which expresses the psalmist's delight in the Torah of God. This is the last section of this psalm. This last verse does not allow us to generalize the problem, hiding in the massive sea of humanity. "I have gone astray like a lost sheep," he sings. He begs the Lord to seek his servant for he has not forgotten the commandments. Those commandments remembered stand in both an accusation against him and a hope for what his life can be. "Let my soul live," he pleads in the verse before this. He longs for the salvation of the LORD. Yet, he also delights in the Law of God. He wants the Torah of God to help him.

There is only one way that can happen. Those rules stand in a fierce accusation against him and us. There is only one way to change that. Christ our Lord must give us his obedience and take our sinfulness to Himself. The psalmist's cry and our cries have come before the Lord. He answered the groanings which are too deep for words which a broken creation rendered to heaven. He sent His only Son. The psalmists delight in the Law of God is genuine and true because Jesus kept all those commandments and rules for us. He gave us that obedience.

Thursday of Pentecost 14 – I Timothy 1:5-17

⁵ The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶ Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, ⁷ desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

⁸ Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, ⁹ understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹ in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

¹² I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

My friend graduated from seminary many years ago. He has since entered glory. It was a different time, the middle of the last century, when he received his first call to a small parish somewhere in the Midwest. He had been schooled in all the latest theological trends and was sure that he had deep insights which people needed to know. The old ways had to give way to the new, he thought. It was a time when many people were far more confident of what we knew.

He had several shut-in members, the folks who could not make it to church, and he faithfully visited them. There was a certain Anna, a widow, who loved to have the pastor come by. She always made cookies. He was a lean young man, and she thought he could use some more substance. She was a devout Christian, a practiced reader of her Bible, a woman who had seen a lot of life. He recollected several deep conversations with her about all the things he had learned at the seminary, things which he believed would change the church and the world too. Her response was always the same, "That's nice, Pastor, have another cookie."

It was only after some years of preaching and serving people that he came to realize the gravity of what Paul wrote in this first verse of our passage today. The real deal is the love that comes

from a heart purified by Christ, from a conscience which has been cleansed by Christ, and from a heart filled with faith. All his finely tuned theological insights either served that love or they did not. Anna understood this. She saw the love of Christ in the visits of this intense and eager young man. She patiently endured his attempts to enlighten her. She had been watching our Lord's work for a long time. She knew what really mattered. She gave him another cookie.

Friday of Pentecost 14 – Luke 15:1–10

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable: ⁴ “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? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ 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.’ ⁷ 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.

⁸ “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ 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.’ ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

If you ever get to Kansas City and have a little time on your hands, visit the Nelson Art Gallery. It has giant, whimsical shuttlecocks in the front lawn, as if some titan has been using the building for a net in a badminton game. But it is in the building where I would send you. Down in the basement, at least that is where they were there the last time I visited, is a collection of necklaces. These came from women in the ancient world, roughly around the time Jesus told this parable. They are dowry necklaces, beautiful jewelry into which coins have been worked. They were a gift from parents to a daughter who was getting married. It was sort of her insurance policy for the young woman, a reserve which she could use in extreme need. She would wear these coins, worked into this necklace every day.

In the second parable that Jesus tells, the woman has lost a coin. We must remember that coins were far more valuable in the ancient world. They did not have paper money nor checks. All wealth was held in coins. Some of them could be very valuable. But if the lost coin was one of these dowry coins, and I think it was, it would have had great emotional as well as monetary value to the woman. It was a gift from her parents on her wedding day. Losing this coin would be a little like losing the stone in your engagement ring.

She sweeps the house, and she searches diligently until she finds it. Then she rejoices. Jesus tells this parable right after the parable of the shepherd finding a lost sheep. If you notice one lost

item, the sheep, is outside and the other, the lost coin is inside. Jesus is making a point here. Some folks who look to be inside the kingdom, inside the church can also be lost. Know and believe this. You are precious to God. He searches diligently for all his lost ones and He along with His angels rejoice every time you repent.