



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Lost Sheep Anonymous"**
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Exodus 32:1,7-14
Second Reading 1 Timothy 1:12-17
Gospel Luke 15:1-10

The first thing I would like to say is that *I didn't choose* the bible readings for today. I wanted to make that *clear* in case our visitors and newcomers thought that the image of lost sheep had to do specifically with them. We are happy that you have come to visit or to stay and would rather emphasize that you are "found" and "have found" a place where you are welcome.

That's not to say that Jesus' parable of the lost sheep, and the good shepherd searching for it, isn't appropriate for a day when guests are encouraged to attend-but not for the reason you think. You see, it doesn't matter when one returns to church, whether it's a matter of seven days or seven years. The fact is that we are *all* "lost sheep" here who have been brought home by the Good Shepherd. Some may have wondered a bit off the path. Some have gotten really, really lost and were in mortal danger, but heard God's call and felt His presence. That's why we're here.

All of the readings today speak of a God who is merciful, compassionate and forgiving. That is the God we worship here, and the one we wish to share with all who come to us. The Old Testament reading from Exodus tells us about God withholding punishment from the people of Israel, despite their deserving it. And the

second reading, from the New Testament letter to Timothy, has the Apostle Paul himself confessing to being “the foremost of sinners” who had “blasphemed and persecuted and insulted” Christ in the persons of his followers, the Church. He writes that mercy was shown to him, “[so] that Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe.” Paul is setting himself up as the example of a lost sheep *par excellence*.

And finally, there’s that story that Jesus tells about the lost sheep, and later another one about the lost coin. Both of these have happy endings in which the finder is overcome with joy. This is a sentiment that will be well known to anyone who has even momentarily misplaced his or her child at the mall: initial relief, a flash of parental anger perhaps, and then unbridled joy. If this is true for us, we are told, it is also true for God- a heavenly Father with lots of children who get very, very lost.

And the rather simple message to us all today is that God welcomes us all home- and I mean all. Those who have been Christians all their lives and even members of a given congregation for decades share with first-timers the identity of home-comers. This is a kind of “12-Step meeting” we hold here- where those who have come to realize that they were powerless over sin come to recharge from their Higher Power and the support of the group. We don’t actually expect people to stand up and say, “Hi, I’m Tyler, and I’m a redeemed sinner”, but that is the subtext of everything we do here. And the purpose of our “meetings” is not to *wallow* in our sins, but to *confess* them, to ask for forgiveness, and to offer each other mutual support in living life in a new way.

The reason that Holy Trinity might be a good place to do this is that here we not only feel a responsibility to God and to those in the congregation, but also to Christian men and women who have gone before us and to those who come after. You may wonder how we do this. I can tell you in one word: Tradition! (Now why does that sound familiar?) This is the function of Tradition in a church like ours, expressed in the way we dress, the words we use in worship, and the music we use. Visitors come to sense that there is something *different* about us from other churches- something that *links* us with the *past* and yet *empowers* us to enter the *future*. That is because

our witness to the redeeming power of Jesus Christ is not just a thing of today, but is timeless and involves the whole of humankind and the world itself in a spiritual quest.

What advice can I give to those who are new to our congregation? How can I help you to know who we are and why we do what we do? First of all: listen to our primary Holy Book, the *Bible*, in the three/four passages we read or sing aloud from it every Sunday. In them, we find the Word of God proclaimed and the record of His dealings with us preserved. We use it as a *resource*, not a *weapon*. Second: follow the words of our *liturgy*. It is sometimes said that for Anglicans *lex orandi est lex credenti*: "what is prayed is what is believed", meaning that if our worship seems wedded to the printed word, it is because we want to be sure that what we are saying is accurate and true. And finally, you can get to know our church by getting to know its people- those sitting here in the pews with you. Do it today during breakfast/lunch. Do it on the women's retreat, or as part of one of our committees or a bible study. Learn why it is that others like you have found a home at Holy Trinity and are happy to share it with you.

First and foremost, however, you will have to understand that Holy Trinity is not made up of people who are better than others- richer, more influential, or even holier. We'd *like* to tell you that, it's just that it's not true. But we *are* made up of people who, when they fall down, stand up again. And they do so with the help of their fellow Christians, fellow sheep of Christ's flock, here in this place. In the words again of St Paul, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." If you fit that description, but would like to do something about it in the company of others like you, then Holy Trinity may well be the place for you. Welcome home!