

To Save the Lost
Matthew 18:10-14

It's easy to see why people continue to be fascinated with angels. After all, verse 10 leads us to believe that even the youngest children have angels who watch over them, and that idea has inspired countless works of art, from paintings and statues to stories and songs:

“Guardian angels around my bed
Joining me in my prayers
They hush the shadows when they dance about
They shoo away the bears.”

Who wouldn't find it comforting to think they have a constant guardian and protector?

Moreover, when we look at the mess so many of us have made of our own lives, when we realize how far short we all have fallen of God's expectations for us, when we admit the weakness of our faith and the coldness of our devotion, it's easy for us to imagine that God wouldn't want to hear our prayers. It's easy to imagine that we need someone to pray for us who is living a more consistently Christian life. No, it's no wonder that so many Christians appeal to angels or to departed saints to help them in times of great danger.

But when we look at this passage as a whole, we find a truth that should give us even more comfort than thoughts of guardian angels or intercessory saints. For here, Jesus opens a window into Heaven, and gives us a glimpse into the amazing love we find in the very heart of God.

And the good news is that we don't need some angel to advocate for us, in the way we have to have a lawyer plead our case before a skeptical judge. And we don't need some departed saint, or even some living pastor or Christian friend to beg God to hear our prayers because they somehow have more influence with Him than we do, or because they are somehow more worthy to have God listen to them.

No, Jesus tells us very plainly in verse 14 that God doesn't want any of the little ones, any of the children of God to perish. Peter repeats this same idea in his second epistle, saying that the Lord does not wish “for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9).

What does that mean? Simply this: God doesn't have to be talked into saving someone, as if he only bestows salvation grudgingly, as if He doesn't really like us or doesn't somehow have enough room for us in His kingdom. God doesn't hold his nose when we come into His presence, afraid that we will somehow contaminate Him with our rebellious, self-centered lives.

No, Jesus tells us that God is instead like a shepherd who cares about every single one of His sheep. Even if He still has ninety-nine out of a hundred safely in the pasture, He rejoices over every wandering one that He finds, over every lost soul that comes to repentance.

Moreover, just like that relentless, devoted shepherd, God is more than willing to take the initiative in the process of our salvation. Instead of just waiting around for us to decide that we need to come home to Him, God takes off in search of those who are going astray. He pursues those who have turned aside from following God's perfect law of love. He seeks out those who are living according to our own reason or experience or feelings, those who have turned away from Him to pursue our own profit or pleasure.

For isn't that what Jesus did for all of us? Oh, He could have remained up in Heaven, in a place of perfect comfort and peace, a place where all the holy angels around Him always do His bidding and never cause Him any problems. But He wasn't satisfied there. Somehow, for Him, Heaven wouldn't be complete without us, regardless of how seriously we have rebelled against our Creator and our King, regardless of how harmful we may be to ourselves or others.

No, instead of giving up on us, Jesus came into our sin-sick world. He chose to suffer all the pain and sorrow, all the temptation and danger this world has to offer. He set out to find His lost sheep, even though He knew that saving us would cost Him His very life.

And isn't that what we celebrate as we come to the Lord's Table today? For remember, Jesus first shared this meal with the most wayward of sheep, with His so-called disciples who would turn on Him, abandoning Him and denying Him that very night. But He went to the cross for them anyway, laying down His life so that all such wandering sheep might be saved. And He calls all who truly repent of our sins and trust in Him as Savior and Lord not only to receive a bite of bread and a sip of juice at this table. He calls us not only to be reconciled to Him but to become one with Him by faith, to share in His resurrection life, and thus to live for His glory and for the good of others.

Yes, the good news is that the Son of Man didn't come to save angels. And He didn't just come to save those amazing people we recognize as saints. No, He came to seek even the most wayward of sheep. He came to save that which was lost.

So, let us fill our Lord's heart with rejoicing! Let us hear His welcome and receive His pardon. Let's heed the call of our seeking shepherd. Let's come to the table.