

Jesus and the Lost Sheep

Our New Testament reading is from Luke 15:1-10. Although he was the sinless Son of God, Jesus had an amazing attraction for the outcasts and those rejected by the religious legalists, who called these outsiders and outcasts “sinners.” The religious legalists, critics and sworn enemies of Jesus were appalled that he could claim to be the Son of God and yet associate with these “sinners,” who were deemed unworthy of temple worship or even informal association. Jesus was given the moniker “friend of ‘sinners’” (Matt. 11:19). What was intended to be an accusation and insult was a gracious tribute to our Savior, Jesus, who had come to seek and to save the lost (Lk. 19:10), those identified as Sinners.

Jesus not only associated with these “sinners,” what *The Message* calls “men and women of doubtful reputation” (1), but he also was possibly hosting them as his guests for table fellowship (2), which was and is in the Middle East a serious matter. For a supposed rabbi to invite to meal a group of outsiders and outcasts would have offended the cultural sensibilities of the noble class, especially the Pharisees. To invite someone to a meal was the equivalent of saying “I include you in my social circle and accept you as an equal” (K Bailey). Jesus gives these parables to show us deeply into the heart of God, the God who seeks and saves sinners. I’ll read **Luke 15:1-10**:

15 *Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*

³*So he told them this parable: ⁴“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ ⁷Just 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 of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When 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.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

We all know what it’s like to lose something valuable. The older I get the more forgetful I get, and so the search for something lost becomes a frequent part of my life, such as lost keys, wallets and other items that are not easily replaced. Recently, as we were heading to our car in the restaurant parking lot, our server came running toward us, saying, “Mr. Roberts, you left your credit card!”

Losing things can be distressing and finding them can be occasions of relief and even celebration. Of course the more valuable the lost item the greater the

distress; and the greater the joy and celebration when the lost item or missing person is found. What greater distress than to have a child who is lost, possibly abducted? And what greater joy than to find a child unharmed?

Madeleine McCann, a 3-year-old girl from Scotland, disappeared from a holiday villa in a Portuguese resort in May of 2007. I recall the intense effort in Portugal and Western Europe by the police and the general public in searching for little Madeleine during the subsequent weeks, months and years after her abduction. Her parents, Gerry and Kate, spearheaded immediately an ongoing worldwide hunt for their daughter (by now would have been age 18), refusing to give up hope of her safe return. In this “most heavily reported missing person case in modern history,” detectives have taken well over thousands of statements, considered hundreds of sex offenders, investigated nearly a hundred “persons of interest, spent about 18 million dollars, and the search continued. Finally a suspect in her murder has been identified and will be brought to trial soon in Germany. This search, ending sadly, indicates the value of a lost child.

When Jesus was accused of welcoming and eating with those whom the self-righteous called “sinners,” that is, those of “doubtful reputation,” he effectively replied by saying this is what God is like. Jesus shows us that God is a sinner-seeking and welcoming God who sent his Son on a rescue mission for his lost children.

The witness of Scripture is clear that God’s love is universal and unconditional. Yet his love is received and experienced only by those who’re aware of our need. Even God doesn’t force his love and grace upon those who resist him. And so Jesus made a clear distinction between the spiritually lost and sick he’d come to save and to heal and those who refused to recognize their lostness, their sickness and their spiritual blindness.

Jesus gave these parables to communicate the condition of the lost. In fact, his critics were more lost than they knew and were resisting the efforts of God to draw them into his saving love. They failed to see themselves also as sinners in desperate need of God’s saving mercy. The first picture is of a sheep that wanders from the fold and becomes lost to the shepherd-owner of the sheep.

In my first church, a congregation of rural people in Southern Indiana, one of our members owned some sheep. He described to me what unintelligent creatures they are and how they are apt illustrations of sinners who move away from God. Sheep are heedlessly consumed with one thing—getting to the next patch of grass. And they will drift away and often into danger, away from the shepherd’s protection. How easily do we sinners become preoccupied with the immediate and lose sight of our spiritual needs and drift into a life that endangers our soul’s eternal well being. The prophet expressed well our tendency to wander heedlessly astray:

*“We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to our own way” (Isaiah 53:6a, NIV).*

A sheep is a helpless creature, unable to defend itself against wild predators and also unable to deliver itself from lost-ness, unable to find its way home to the safety of the fold. So in our lost-ness, we like sheep are heedless and helpless, and Paul would add, hopeless. Describing how that in our pre-conversion state we were dead in our transgressions and sins, Paul says also that when we were separated from Christ in our lost-ness we were without hope and without God in the world (Eph. 2:1, 12).

To add emphasis to this picture of hopelessness, Jesus tells the story of the peasant woman who lost a coin, worth about a day's crucial wage and having also sentimental value as perhaps a part of a bridal headdress or necklace. Being a typical house in this place and period, there were no windows and the floor was dirt, covered with a straw mat. The task facing the woman was like "finding a needle in a haystack" (W Barclay). So, both the sheep and the coin were hopelessly lost apart from the seeking of the shepherd and the woman. When Jesus told this story about the owner-shepherd leaving the fold to seek the lost sheep, he was referring to himself and to his mission. His seeking after the lost sheep was reflective of the heart of God, who yearns to draw his lost ones to himself. In Old Testament passages we read of God as the shepherd (e.g. Is. 40:11; Ps. 23). And Jesus referred to himself as the Good Shepherd, the one who not only risks his life for the sheep like a good earthly shepherd, but the one who lays down his life knowingly for the sheep (Jn. 10:11). He emptied himself of glory and suffered shame and humiliating suffering and a horrible death on the cross for us (Phil. 2:6-8; Heb. 12:2).

These parables of Jesus are vivid portrayals of our worth in God's sight. The lost sheep, representative of every one of us, is known to God, and we've been known to him since before the creation of the world (Jer. 1:5; Eph. 1:4). We're of great worth in his sight, just as the lost coin was of great worth in the sight of the woman. Peter ventures to place a value on us when he writes that we're worth more than silver or gold. In fact, we are worth "the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

Those of us who're in Christ know that we didn't take the first step; the only way we came to faith was by his relentless pursuit. The shepherd pursues the lost sheep with passion, purpose and persistence. The shepherd makes his search with risk, perhaps to encounter wild animals that could've devoured the lost sheep. As Jesus told this parable, he knew his destiny was his suffering and death on the cross.

Today the nation honors the memory of the first responders to the 9-11 Attack on America in 2001. Many who survived their rescue work have suffered and some have died from injuries and illness contracted in the search and rescue efforts.

Christ Jesus entered the world knowing that he would have to give his life, not just risk it, for you and me. In his humanity, Jesus dreaded his ineffable suffering and death for us, yet he surrendered to the will of the Father for the cross. In times when we are tempted to doubt the love of God, we need only to look at the cross, which was the price God paid to rescue us from sin and death.

The shepherd looks for the sheep until he finds it (4) and the woman sweeps and scours the house until she finds her lost coin (8). Jesus will not be frustrated in his search for his lost ones. This past Sunday I shared Francis Thompson's "The Hound of Heaven," written in 1893 and more widely read than any other religious poem of the past century, is the story of a man running from God. Thompson describes the persistence of God as the pursuit and persistence of a hound. But the fleeting soul knew that there was no ultimate escape from God. The "Hound of Heaven" caught, rescued and restored Frances Thompson. But for others, God's pursuit continues because he doesn't give up on his lost children.

"Rejoicing in heaven" and "rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God" expresses the joy of God himself (R H Stein). By contrast, the Orthodox Jews said, "*There is joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God*" (W Barclay). God rejoices that we who're rescued and brought home are restored to a relationship with him as our loving Father. Whatever we've done and wherever we've strayed is irrelevant to the way God loves us. The lost sheep did nothing to contribute to his recovery, no more than the inanimate lost coin. Even the prodigal son (11ff) returned to the Father with less than noble motives. God's love for us is unconditional as is his restoration of us. God simply delights, actually is overjoyed, by our restoration to his arms of love.

Here's a picture of God himself, drawn as a jubilant shepherd and woman, throwing a party because lost sinners of doubtful reputation and those who were a plague upon good society had come home! The church gathered for worship, service and fellowship should have a party-like atmosphere, charged with the joy of God. It was CS Lewis who said that joy is the serious business of heaven.

Even as we gather into the fold, the fellowship of God's people, we can rejoice that, though we might have strayed in mind and heart this past week, we've come home. We've been found. Maybe our thoughts of God have been as erroneous as those of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Maybe we've thought that God is more interested in judging and condemning than in saving, others as well as ourselves. We need to see God in the heart of Jesus, who has come to seek and to save us. Like he sought Francis Thompson, he's seeking us relentlessly.

Those whom Jesus the Shepherd seeks are the outcasts, those of doubtful reputation. They are often the dregs of society and those we would tend to regard as a drain on society and on our resources. Those that Jesus is after may well not be those we would like to see show up as guests at Dale Heights. But he

seeks also the wealthy, powerful and successful socialite and community leader, whom we might tend to envy. Maybe our need this morning is to repent of the sin of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who somehow thought they deserved God's favor, unlike the "sinners" drawn to Jesus. Do you and I realize how we have strayed from God's love and forgotten how much he loves us and wants us to come home to the center of his presence, fellowship and blessing?

We can stray from God even when we go to church! I need to remember that, apart from God's love and grace, I would be hopelessly lost and condemned. I cannot take God's rescue for granted and must, as Scripture says, examine myself and make my calling and election sure (2 Cor. 13:5; 2 Pet. 1:10). But when we turn back to God, whatever our outward condition, and receive his love, heaven breaks out into joyous celebration. Although I am a child of God's grace, I still find my heart is prone to wander. I fail to remember how desperately lost I was, even as a young boy, and how, apart from his keeping grace, I would wander from his love.

I have a profound appreciation for those God is using to reach out to the incarcerated, those who are most likely in our society to admit they are lost sinners. A pastor colleague of mine worked as a chaplain with a prison ministry called "God of Hope Ministry." God gives hopes to prisoners, and gives hope to sinners like me. There might be more hope for lost prisoners than for us church people. I need to recognize that around me there are people who are lost--people of infinite value. Jesus seeks them, just as he sought you and me. By his love and grace alone.