

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
14th Sunday after Pentecost
September 15, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Ezekiel 34:11-16

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 15:1–7 NRSV

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying,

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable:

“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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

“And 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.’

“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.

Shepherd Business

I never kept **sheep**, milked sheep, herded sheep, or sheared sheep. If you lived in New South Wales in southern Australia or the South Island of New Zealand, most folks would look at you rather strangely if you made a statement like that. Indeed, in many of those areas, the sheep far outnumber the human beings in the area. For those folks Down Under, these four-legged critters are the major industry and source of income for them. Indeed, they remain **preferred animals** for farms across the world. Sheep were among the first domesticated animals and continue to be **valuable** for what they produce year-to-year, milk and cheeses and wool, as well as remaining a significant source of meat as lamb and mutton.

Biblically, we know that the earliest of the **Hebrew** families kept sheep and were wealthy because of the sheep reproducing in number. Some of that success came from the methods which they used to **protect** these otherwise helpless animals. **Abraham** and his many descendants kept sheep along with goats, and camels and a few cattle (*Genesis* 12-13). Sheep were a source of wealth and needed a lot of protection. A rich family might hire shepherds to tend the flocks night and day, year-round. Others, like Jesse in *1 Samuel*, used a more traditional approach, requiring the sons to keep the flocks in the field. Recall that young David, later to become a warrior king, was called from the fields to meet the prophet Samuel (*1 Samuel* 16).

As time passed among the Hebrew people during the time of the prophets, flocks of sheep became common, and they became a touchstone, or reference point, for those who were **wealthy**. Over time, those who prospered felt superior to other people and became objects of **criticism**. The reason is that the owners hardly need to get involved in getting these sheep to grow and to multiply: The expanding flocks built **great wealth** for the owner faster than compound interest in a bank. Indeed, in the time of Jesus sheep are so domesticated that they are practically **defenseless**: dogs, wolves, and mountain lions would attack the sheep at night, so that it took a team of shepherds to protect a large herd. But, like today a **hired shepherd** was like a farm worker today: underpaid and likely **under appreciated**.

So, this is the background to our parable of the **Lost Sheep**, which Jesus tells us in our scripture lesson today. There are several interesting points to this very familiar story, some of which you know instinctively readily. Other reasons may surprise you. Just as Jesus produced a bit of **amazement** with the first telling of these stories he created, you may see things a little differently after we finish: That is the role of the **parable**, to take common events and provide a **deeper meaning** to the words and to the **lives** of those who hear them. Indeed, only the most arrogant among the audience around Jesus would have scoffed at his words. So, if you have a **new insight** that feels puzzling or uncomfortable, relax. That is just what Jesus wanted you to feel.

Let's look at these verses in a little more detail: First of all, a **single sheep** is lost. We learn that ninety-nine (99) remain. So, doing the math for ourselves we come up with the number one hundred (100). This reflects a large number, especially of sheep with only **one shepherd** on hand. Secondly, the number **one hundred** is a big, round whole number. You might think of your childhood. If your friend in 3rd grade asked how many **marbles** you had in your pocket, and you said 100, well, that would sound and look like a whole lot, wouldn't it?

So, it is a **big flock**. And, if there is another shepherd helping out, Jesus does not tell us about it. So, the headstrong and, apparently, very guilty-feeling shepherd, **abandons** the remaining flock of 99 sheep and goes **searching** for the lost sheep. In abandoning the flock, the shepherd is risking the **safety** of those remaining sheep: the **ninety-nine**. This is especially true if he is working **alone**: without a backup, as we would say today. Whether this shepherd is the son of a wealthy farmer or a hired hand, we do not know. But, truly this is a **bold move**. Jesus knows it when he says it. The **sheep owners** in the crowd very likely let out a collective gasp! Furthermore, very likely it is late in the day, because the purpose of **herding** the sheep together is to place them in a close, protected area. With a shepherd or two in place, the potential of loss to predators is much reduced.

Now, we find that this valiant, or some might think misguided, shepherd goes into the wilderness probably with the sun going down, trying to find this lost sheep. Remember that there are two possible **outcomes** here: if you succeed, you usually see a **hero**, while failure leaves you alone without friend or comfort: a "**zero**." Pretty soon, Jesus tells us that the man has **found** the lost sheep. This is a cause for **celebration**, certainly.

But, those sheep owners in the audience probably thought, “God really does protect the foolhardy because I would have fired the joker that did this.” But, as we know it is hard to argue with **success**, so the adventuresome shepherd is **overjoyed**: He keeps his job, the lost sheep is found, and amazingly his flock of **ninety-nine sheep**, which he left behind, have not been rustled, killed for a meal, or torn apart by wolves.

So, where is the **lesson** in all this shepherding? Well, Jesus quickly draws a comparison to the celebration in heaven when **one lost person** repents of their sins and comes **into the fold** of believers. Likely this is no surprise to the disciples, who have been around him for quite a while now, perhaps over two years. But, this statement of Jesus suddenly follows a small adventure story of potential foolishness. Not only that, but if there were ninety-nine **righteous** people waiting on the outcome of the lost person whom they have been ignored. After all, they did not require repentance.

Through the parable Jesus says that God, our Creator, got more excited over one lost soul than the law-fearing, righteous people right in front of Jesus, the Pharisees. Surrounded by tax collectors and other sinners, Jesus told them that when they repent, there is a celebration in heaven, even if only one of them does so. All the rest, which should include us today, who remained obedient to the law, tithed their income, prayed two to three times a day, and blessed every meal are not the cause for celebration. The expected outcome has been **reversed!** The Pharisees probably did not like that at all. Most likely, most of us would feel the same way.

Well, here is where we fall into the trap of not being so much righteous, but **self-righteous**. Stop and think: Apparently, those who told the Gospel story kept these parables together, because the writer of *Luke* intentionally placed them here together in a string. After all, repetition is the hallmark of adult education. (Stated another way, if you repeat things often enough even an adult can learn.)

There are three parables in a row are in Chapter 15 of the *Gospel of Luke*. The next one shows a woman finding a coin. She celebrates with her friends and neighbors (*Luke* 15:8-10). So, not only are the heavenly host filled with joy, but **imperfect human beings**, as well. The last portion of this chapter is the parable of the Prodigal Son, which plays on a similar story line. This one is even more dramatic, because instead of hanging around sheep, the wayward son turns himself into an outcast, defiling himself by caring for the forbidden **ritually unclean** pigs. On his return, his father **welcomes him** with joy and celebration (*Luke* 15:11-32).

But, the same father forgives the arrogance and anger of his remaining son, who stayed to manage the farm, even though the older son is angry with his father’s act of love. He hardly deserved this sort of mercy and grace. Of course, that is where we should find ourselves: Like the angry son, we often remain ungrateful even when God has blessed us far beyond what we deserve. Regardless, the father took in both of his sons; and, God does the same for us through God’s mercy and grace which we know through Jesus Christ.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus approached sinner after sinner: tax collectors, haughty and self-absorbed temple leaders, and outcasts like lepers and many others. But, what kind of response followed each reversal? It is always **joy**: unbridled and nearly uncontrolled joy. Jesus says, that is the response in heaven with God, responding in delight to an otherwise insignificant event involving the poor and the sinful.

Of course, this type of celebration could include us who are so diligent and conscientious: We can view this heavenly celebration as an **additional joy** that followed this sudden demonstration of **faith**. We who continually are seeking to know God in Jesus Christ probably do please God at some turn. But, our **Reformed traditions** reminds us that we do not earn God's favor or God's forgiveness. The **grace of God** alone is responsible for that.

Nevertheless, Who knows what joy took place at the time of our **baptism**, at our confirmation, at that decision to increase your giving and tithe as part of your **spiritual commitment** to the **work** of God, or in that quiet moment in worship during a prayer, or the last stanza of the last hymn. Another view of this parable would have Jesus holding the **self-righteous** at arm's length. They think they should be celebrated and standing at the head of the line (*Luke 14:7-14*). Jesus said that it is better to practice **humility** than to impress others with your false sense of self-worth. Jesus could be saying that the fate of the righteous, those who think they have figured it all out, will not benefit from additional attention. But, the one who required the effort and the attention will benefit the most.

Well, we truly have taken on a lot today. So, now we have to ask ourselves: Where are **you and I** in this parable?

- Are we the **lost sheep**? I know I find myself there more often than I would like.

But, Christ is always there to lead us, guided by the **Holy Spirit**.

- Are we the **other ninety-nine**? Among these are the confident, perhaps even overconfident, whom Jesus names as the **righteous**. As we said, we might call some of them self-righteous. That is a sin, but that can be overcome, because none of us are beyond **redemption**.

Time after time, Jesus says that he is the **Good Shepherd**, the Messiah, the **Christ**. Because of this, he is always responsible for the **entire flock**. And, later in the Gospel story Jesus **reassures** us that we are **constantly** in the care of God through the Holy Spirit.

The shepherd left behind a most valuable asset: his herd. Exposed to wolves and robbers, no one stayed behind to look after them. The shepherd did an **unusual act** in seeking out the lost sheep. But, Jesus says that this was the proper thing to do: a necessary act of **faith**. What would you and I be willing to leave behind to go alongside Jesus and meet him at least halfway to us?

- Our long-held conclusions about **society** and who receives a reward and blessing?
- The **security** of our employment: Would we give it up for a call to **missional living**?
- The **comfort** of a well-appointed home to spend time among the most downtrodden group of people you can imagine in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, or the oppressed Christians in Syria and the battered in the Bahamas?
- Our **free time** at home to fill sacks of vegetables and whole grain foods for families who struggle to feed themselves, their parents, and their children?
- Or, perhaps the **call** to extend ourselves is right here among our own congregation to help our friend and our **neighbor**?

God knows our **weaknesses** and shortcomings. God is not overlooking them, but looking **past them** to the goodness which resides in each one of us. Indeed, Christ came to remind us of these imperfections, this **shortfall** in courage and commitment, causing us to refocus our time and energy from ourselves to **others**.

Christ is the Good Shepherd, but this role he takes on is not easy: Just like the shepherds then and now, his path he leads us on is treacherous. But, he **leads us** gladly, to restore us and, like the flock in his care, to **make us whole**:

Keeping us in the **care** of Almighty God, who **never leaves** us.

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