

Finding the Lost

The parables in our Gospel reading sound charming but the deep feeling behind them may be almost impenetrable to us this morning. We, after all, have so much, how likely are we to miss a single item from among our many possessions? Our houses are all nicely appointed, with excess belongings stuffing closets, garages, & sheds. I've had two e-mails this week from friends looking to give away perfectly useful items that for one reason or another have become surplus. Our silent auction next Sunday will be based on things both useful and beautiful that their owners have decided they could bear to part with for the benefit of Good Shepherd Baptist Church. When you have plenty, it's easy to be parted from just one thing.

Or, maybe I should say, usually it's easy. When I was a small child, I had lots of toys. In fact, if you'd asked my mother, who had to deal with my very messy room, she'd have told you I had too many toys and books and clothes and whatever else ended up on the floor of my room. I was an only child, after all, and, in retrospect, pretty spoiled. I remember what I had more of than anything else, was stuffed animals. They filled my little bed so that there was scarcely room for me and overflowed it. But then, when I was five, my dad took a work assignment in England. We were to all move there for over three years and, due to the shipping costs, could take very little with us. I remember that I was allowed to select two of my enormous menagerie of plush friends to make the journey and that was very hard.

When we got to England, of course, I began to acquire new toys and books. Among the toys were a collection of highly detailed plastic animals, carefully painted in their natural colors. My favorite of these was a tiny Emperor Penguin. That little penguin was my constant companion. He often went with me in my pocket to school. And when we took a long car trip on the mainland of Europe one summer, he went with me then, too. I was very careful to keep track of him. Until I wasn't. We arrived home and I realized I didn't know where the little penguin was. Oh, what heartbreak! I searched and searched and wept! I think I kept the household in turmoil for days. It wasn't until about a year later, when my dad was cleaning our leased Austin Minor for return to the dealer, that he uncovered the little penguin wedged into the housing for the retractable seatbelt. And then, what joy there was! That little penguin, incidentally, formed the nucleus for what became quite a collection of penguin figurines, mugs, t-shirts, etc., given to me over the years by friends and family. I'm sorry to say he disappeared on one of our many moves – the one from Louisville to Bothell, I think. I grieved a bit then but a forty-year old's nostalgic sadness is in no way comparable to the wild grief of a six-year old deprived of his favorite toy.

But we are not God's favorite plastic toys but rather God's beloved children. Nor does our loving creator tire of us over the years and turn to other pursuits and concerns as I did in relation to my stuffed animals or even my little penguin. God's love for us is deep and wide, like the river in the old song. It is a wild love, untamable, just as our God is, like Aslan in the Narnia books, not a tame lion but good beyond measure. In fact, if we take the time to unpack our parables this morning, we discover that God's love for each of us is quite shockingly wild.

As my friend John Forman said in relation to these two parables when we read them together on Wednesday, "Who does that?!?" What shepherd in his right mind leaves 99 sheep to their own devices in the wilderness while he goes to hunt one gone astray? Whether the shepherd in question was the owner of the sheep or just a hired hand, there's no doubt that 99 sheep are far more important, in terms of the value of the asset, than one. Which of us would put 99% of our

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accumulated wealth, our homes, cars, possessions, and bank accounts, at risk for the sake of 1%? But Jesus says that God loves those of us who are in some way “lost” so much that God will act like that crazy shepherd to bring us back into the fold.

And yet, it also seems to me that God’s search for the one lost sheep of one hundred, the one lost coin of ten, also has to do with the entirety of the Beloved Community. When the shepherd returns home with the lost sheep (and, presumably, the 99 as well), it is the whole neighborhood he calls together to rejoice. When the woman finds the lost coin, it is the whole neighborhood she calls together to be glad with her. We must not, in our typical 21st century American way, focus only on the one sheep or coin that was lost, particularly if that means putting ourselves in the place of the lost one at the center of the tale. We must also remember that the whole community was lessened by the absence of the one. In restoring the lost, God not only rescues that one from danger or abandonment but God also restores the health of the community for the absence of even one member diminishes the group.

In the relatively conservative evangelical circles in which I was raised, there was a great deal of personal piety connected to this story of the one and the 99. Some of you also may remember the hymn, “The Ninety and Nine,” by Ira Sankey, made popular in the revival work of Dwight L. Moody. In general, we were encouraged to think of ourselves as that poor little lost sheep, innocently wandered away, cold and trembling, brought triumphantly home on the shoulders of Jesus, whose outstretched arms, as if once again on the cross, made the perfect shelter for the pathetic and blameless lamb. But I don’t think that picture really coincides with what Jesus was talking about. Instead, consider if you will, this story:

“One time in New York, Archbishop Desmond Tutu presided over a distinguished gathering. Looking around the room, he asked if he might be taken somewhere to celebrate communion where people knew greater suffering. Arrangements were made for him to go to a prison north of the city. Even there, he wanted to meet only with the most defiant and hardened women. When they had gathered, he looked around the room, the concrete walls void of beauty, and said he was relieved not to see any religious pictures. He said these pictures too often do not tell a true story.

‘Are you familiar with that picture of the Good Shepherd,’ he asked? You know the one, where he is wearing a beautiful white robe, with a clean, fluffy, gentle lamb lounging across his shoulders? That picture is wrong. A lamb in that situation would be a mess. It would not look good or smell good, and neither would Jesus. Both would be scratched and sweaty and covered with brambles. They would be exhausted and filthy. All of us are when we are at last on our way home.’”

I tell that story because I think it is important to remember for whom it is that God bears this wild, unrestrained, illogical love. Jesus tells this story in response to a complaint from the Pharisees, the good, religious people of his day, that he is hanging out and even eating with tax collectors and sinners. Now, I know this congregation. We do pretty well at welcoming those that the Pharisees would have dubbed sinners – the ones whose lives have been broken, the ones who don’t follow the prescribed path, the ones who have doubts and speak them freely, the ones who have transgressed. But how would we feel about the tax collectors? I’m not speaking now

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about the old, time-honored disdain that Americans have for agents of the I.R.S. – “revenue-ers” as they were called in my native South. Tax collectors in Jesus’ time, remember, were not agents of a government elected by the people, no matter how popular or unpopular, but were the creatures of a government installed and propped up by invading Imperial forces. Somebody queue the “Darth Vader March” from John Williams’ score for “Star Wars!” These guys were the turncoats of Palestine, the ones who would have turned Luke and Old Ben over to the Stormtroopers. They were the equivalent, in more historical terms, of the Vichy government of World War II France, the Quislings of Norway, the ones in Holland who said, “That house over there has a secret annex and that Jewish Frank family is hiding there.” To bring it closer to home, those Judean tax collectors today would be members of American Al Qaeda, the disaffected youth who go off to join the so-called Islamic State, the unknown Americans who aided and abetted the suicide pilots of 9/11. And Jesus sat down and ate dinner with them.

I don’t mean to shock you but I think it’s important for us to remember just how all-encompassing God’s love and forgiveness is. Remember our reading from I Timothy. The Apostle Paul reminds his younger friend of his own journey to redemption: “I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence.” We need to recall more often who this man was whose writings make up nearly half our New Testament. Had Saul of Tarsus not experienced the presence of the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, he might well have personally stamped out the nascent Jesus movement. He was complicit in the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and later wrote to the church in Galatia, “For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.” Saul’s conversion by Jesus is just as startling as the acceptance of the tax collectors by Jesus. These were not nice people. These were not fluffy lambs. These were the human vipers of their society and we must remember that they were loved and forgiven by God.

The theme of God’s love and forgiveness and the idea that no one is beyond that love and forgiveness are important for us to consider today, September 11th. The events of fifteen years ago still remain fresh for many in our nation and still impact our national psyche, not necessarily in healthy ways. The pall of fear that descended that day has given permission for ever growing restrictions on how we travel, how we assemble, how we go about our daily lives. We are still mired in wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq that were a result of the thirst for vengeance following the terrorists’ attacks. One front page headline of the Seattle Times yesterday was about the ability of Americans to sue Saudi Arabia over those same events. USA Today yesterday quoted a family member of one of the 9/11 victims as saying, “This isn’t over.”

Despite the time passed, despite the clear message of Jesus on the subject of forgiveness even for the most despised malfeasants, we find ourselves subject to the eternal loop of anger and retribution. We are like the ancient Israelites who prayed to God about their enemies, “pursue them with your storm; with your tempest, humble them into terror.” In their own way, they called down the shock and awe to which our military subjected the people of Baghdad, just upriver from the Judeans’ enemy capital of Babylon. Did it make you a little uncomfortable to open our worship by reading Psalm 83 responsively? God’s people have never been immune to the seeking of vengeance, despite divine admonitions to the contrary. We’re no better, or worse,

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than those who raged against Babylon or those who scolded Jesus for hanging out with the enemy combatants of his day. Like the good people who reacted to evil and like the evildoers themselves, we need the healing touch of God, God's grace, and God's care.

I found a lovely resonance in the line from Pamela Greenberg's translation of Psalm 83 which closed our responsive reading: "pursue them with your storm; with your tempest, humble them into terror." About a week ago, Connie and I watched with delight the 2010 film version of William Shakespeare's "The Tempest," directed by the great Julie Taymor and starring Helen Mirren in a feminized version of the protagonist's role, now called "Prospera." If you don't know the story of that great play, Prospero, Duke of Milan, has been betrayed by his brother and by the King of Naples and cast adrift in a small boat with his young daughter, Miranda. Providentially, they land on an island where Prospero is able to use his knowledge of white magic to build a home for himself and the little girl, win the service of the sprite, Ariel, and subdue the malicious Caliban, himself the offspring of an evil witch. Twelve years pass before Prospero's enemies come sailing by – he whips up a tempest to "humble them into terror." By the end of the play, those who sinned have all been forgiven, Prospero has been restored to his duchy, and peace in the next generation seems to be assured by the love between Miranda and Prince Ferdinand, heir of Naples.

Please note that I said that the sinners have been forgiven, not that they had repented. In fact, other than from King Alonso of Naples, repentance seems a very dubious quality for most of those who have schemed and plotted the destruction of that which is good and proper. But all are swept up in Prospero's pardon and included in the nuptial festivities – just as the whole community is invited to rejoice with the extravagant shepherd and the relieved woman. Shakespeare, at the end of his career and near the end of his life, seems to have a keen appreciation for the wedding banquet of the Beloved Community.

Where are we this morning? Are we ready, like the shepherd in Jesus' story, to walk away from our happy community to seek out that straying, dirty, troublesome lamb, just so that the community can be restored to its full measure? Will we seek out those who have damaged our calm by their roving, even hurtful ways, by lifting every piece of furniture and shining our lights into all the dark corners? Do we reach out to the villains of our community, be they as bloodstained as Saul of Tarsus? Or do we shake our fist and say, "This isn't over," and beg God to rain down destruction, these fifteen years after disaster? Are we still working to make Good Shepherd Baptist Church and our broader community a meeting ground where hope and healing and love are found?

May God guide us and strengthen us for the always difficult work of healing wounds, changing hearts, and spreading shalom. Thanks be to God. Amen.