

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 2010
SCRIPTURES: Luke 15:1-7; 1 Timothy 1:12-17
“Lost and Found”

Rally Day

How many of you have ever raised sheep? (About four hands raised!) When I was young my Grandfather kept a small herd of sheep on the farm that our family moved to when I was twelve. Over the years we also had cows, chickens, hogs, and a horse or two. (We never raised goats.) I have to say that there is not one animal that I remember on the farm that was as pitiful as those sheep. Sheep are not very smart. They are passive but flighty and scared everything. Unless you have a herding dog, sheep are more difficult to get from one place to another than a herd of cats. When read the parable of the lost sheep I think of two things. First, it is difficult for me to imagine a single sheep being lost because they either all stay together or they all scatter, which means that all of them would be lost. Secondly, the shepherd in Jesus’ parable must have had a better relationship with his sheep that I ever did to be able to put a sheep across his shoulders and carry it without getting kicked silly.

Of course the point of the story is not the sheep themselves, but the fact that a good shepherd will make the effort to seek out one lost sheep, often leaving the rest of the herd to fend for themselves.

OK, I have another question for you. How many of you, when you hear the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin naturally identify yourselves or imagine yourselves as the seeker and then think about times when you yourself have lost something and about how you went about seeking it? (Several hands are raised.) How many see yourselves or identify yourselves with the lost sheep or the lost coin and remember times when you yourself were lost? (A few hands raised.) How many might even identify yourselves as a part of the ninety-nine sheep left in the herd or the coins in pouch? (Again a few hands.) When we consider our lives and all the situations we have been in through the years, I think we can all find moments when we have played each of the roles in the story; times when we have been the seeker, times when we have been the one who was sought out, times when we have been part of the greater crowd, those who are settled in with everyone around us.

The stories were of course offered by Jesus to counter the negative comments made by the leaders of the Jewish people, by the Pharisees and the Scribes, who found it distasteful that Jesus should interact with people who they deemed second class, unworthy, lost and incapable of

receiving the attention of God and therefore unworthy of receiving their attention. You know, I always felt for the tax collectors. They somehow seem to get named specifically. It's always tax collectors and assorted and sundry sinners. I guess that no matter how honest or a fair tax collector might have been in his or her work, they were always seen as sinners simply for the fact that they were collaborating with the hated Roman occupiers. Of course every age has its tax collectors and sinners; people who are seen as criminal or nearly criminal, those who are unethical or immoral, or people whose only crime might be the fact that their skin happens to be a different color or their faith not the same as mine, those of a different caste or at least a radically different economic level. Sometimes we run into even those who are tax collectors in this age. my father's cousin was an IRS auditor, which meant that he spent a good part of his career being verbally abused by people who thought that he and the IRS were out to get them. That abuse led to a life of depression and a relatively early death.

As we explore the message of the stories of the lost coin and the lost sheep and the third story, the story of the prodigal son that was not part of today's lectionary reading, we must realize that we can find ourselves, at various times in our lives, in the role of all the characters represented in those stories. We are, at times, individually and corporately the ones that become lost and in need of finding. We are, at times, the searchers for the lost. We are, at times, a part of the larger group left unattended while the one searching goes off to find the one who is lost. Sometimes we even find ourselves in the role of the surrounding community, those friends and neighbors who are called together to celebrate the finding, the recovery of that which was lost.

The moral of the story is clear. God is concerned about all God's children, not just the faithful ones, not just the self-sufficient ones, not just the successful ones. If we do find ourselves within the realm of the "chosen", the faithful, the dutiful and the blessed then we must realize that there will be times when we may be left in our faithfulness and success while God seeks out the lost. If we find ourselves within the ranks of those who, for whatever reason, are lost then we must have hope and confidence that there is nowhere that we can roam that is so far from God that God cannot find us. We must know that there will be times in our lives when we must joyfully partner with God to become the seekers, the shepherds, the sweepers of dark corners, looking with God for those who are lost. And there will be times when we will be called by God to rejoice when that which was lost is found, when the one who was considered dead is restored to the community alive and well.

Above all this we must strive to be aware; aware of ourselves, aware of God and the will of God, aware of others and of the world around us. The most unfortunate situation for a person in life is not that he or she might be lost, but that the person cannot see how lost she or he actually is. There is no sin in being part of the righteous and faithful many; yet there is great sin in being part of this group without realizing how blessed we are and assuming a position of superiority over others. And how terrible that we might fail to realize a call from God to assist in the search for that which is lost and miss our chance to be God's partners in the seeking!

In today's passage from First Timothy, Paul rejoices in the fact that God took him from a position of being one who persecuted those who he considered lost to one who had become fully partnered with God to seek out and save the lost through the good news of Jesus Christ. And so, in his own way, Paul, while considering himself one of the ninety-nine, came to realize his own form of waywardness, and in this discovery became a seeker in the name of Christ.

It is my prayer that our eyes will be constantly opened anew by the grace and power of God's Holy Spirit so that we might have a continually renewed vision and understanding of what it is to be lost and the joy of being found; of how we might partner with God to be the ones who seek; and of how we might welcome with joy those who might be considered a lost people. For it is the grace of God that is at work in all these instances, working for the day when there will be no lost and no ninety-nine, no outsiders and insiders; that day when we will all be one family, sisters and brothers in one household where God is our light and our source, our comfort and our joy; that place where there is no darkness and no place unknown; where God is in all and through all, to all eternity and beyond. Amen.