

Sermon for Proper 19C
Sunday, September 15, 2019
“Priceless Value”

Texts: Luke 15:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Exodus 32: 7-14;
Psalm 51:11

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every time a lesson involving sheep and shepherds comes around, I always ponder how well city dwellers like ourselves connect with the image of sheep and the shepherd. Indeed, in my own life of living in numerous cities and suburbs, I have come across relatively few shepherds—I don't know about you and what your experience might have been. The only shepherds I can recall seeing are those I may have seen from a car or train window while traveling the countryside of this and many other countries. And I've never really spoken to one. Our “contact” if you will with shepherds and sheep is largely through the stories we have in the Bible. However, there are a few things that I think we know about shepherds. Shepherds tend sheep. Shepherds care for their flock; their responsibility and duty are for the well-being of the sheep in their care. Shepherds guide sheep and keep them safe. Shepherds guide sheep into the places they ought or need to go. Shepherds often have to guide sheep into places that the sheep are not sure they should or want to go, because the shepherd sees the way ahead and pushes the sheep in a direction, and the sheep trust the shepherd. In any flock of sheep there are wanderers who want to go in a different direction, but the shepherd pokes and prods until all the sheep are going in the same direction. The shepherd doesn't want any of the sheep left behind. The relationship of sheep and shepherd is also metaphor for the church; as I'm sure you know, the word “pastor” comes from the Latin word for shepherd. The pastor doesn't want anyone in the flock left behind, regardless of the direction he or she takes them, and the sheep must trust the shepherd.

Today's gospel lesson features two parables—the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Lost Coin. They are both very similar: the person in each parable loses something of great value and drops everything to find it. The shepherd values the sheep and doesn't want a single one of them left behind, so he goes and finds the one that is lost. The woman values her coins greatly and tears her house apart until she finds it. Have you ever lost something of great value—money, jewelry, reading glasses? You, too, would tear up your whole house looking for it, wouldn't you? Most of you have sons or daughters, and some of you here have young children. Just imagine what you would do if one of them was lost. You would drop everything to go look for your child.

It may seem that the two parables in today's Gospel lesson are about losing something of value, but these stories are really about paying attention to those things that need attention, and not just that, but these parables are about how God pays attention to us. Jesus told these parables to the scribes and Pharisees who had been

criticizing him—as they often did—because they were bothered that he ate with tax collectors and sinners who listened to him, and they didn't like that Jesus interacted with Samaritans, either. Jesus was associating with “the wrong kind of people,” in their minds. They thought Jesus should be keeping company only with righteous people; people who followed Jewish law properly, people who didn't live in sin or were sellouts to the Roman government. Indeed, the scribes and Pharisees knew their Bible; scribes copied the Hebrew scriptures word-for-word, letter-by-letter, and the Pharisees interpreted them. But, Jesus had to remind them that the Bible is a record of God's grace and mercy. The two parables are part of a trilogy of stories about grace and mercy; the third parable in the trilogy, the one that comes next, is the story of the Prodigal Son.

The hard truth is that in life we all make mistakes. Each of us has sinned at least once in our lives. We do those things which we ought not to have done, and we fail to do the things we ought to do; we confess that every time we gather for worship at mass and the daily office. There isn't a single one of us alive who doesn't do the wrong thing sometime, or hurt someone once in a while, or make a bad choice, or might be battling with an addiction, but with God, there is always room to change; there is always an opportunity to do better. We are given a second chance. These two stories, along with the story of the Prodigal Son, are not so much about repentance as they are about the great capacity of God to be like the tenacious shepherd and the determined woman and searches for us until he finds us. In neither of today's parables does the lost repent. God is always willing to welcome us back when we mess up, because God does not want simply repentance from us, he wants conversion. He doesn't want us simply to say, “Forgive me, Lord,” he wants us to change our ways by praying the words of today's psalm: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

In Paul's first letter to Timothy that was the epistle lesson, Paul admitted to how he had been the most ardent persecutor of followers of Jesus, but that Jesus came to save sinners and died for us so that we could have a second chance. God has the utmost patience. Moses, too, saw how patient and merciful God is, when God's anger burned hot against the Israelites who turned their backs on him and began to worship a golden calf, after he had miraculously brought them out of Egypt. Yet, Moses interceded and persuaded God to change his mind.

The wonderful lesson that we are to learn today—the good news for us—is that we are precious to God and he wants the best for us. Even when we willingly stray from following the path that he knows is best for us, he will always stay with us and nudge us like a good shepherd to go in the proper way. But, even if we continue to stray like the lost sheep, he loves us just the same.

And while the message today is mostly for our comfort and reassurance, no good biblical lesson would be complete without some action item for us as well. In our daily

lives, we're expected to live in God's image, and so we are expected to show grace and mercy by giving ourselves and others the opportunity to change. The scribes and Pharisees who constantly criticized Jesus thought they knew the scriptures, but they were so focused on the details and following the rules that they didn't leave open the possibility for a person to change. We should always be open to the possibility that those around us can change. That does not mean that we should condone bad behavior; there's a lot of evil happening in the world around us, and there are a lot of people who are behaving badly. Mass shootings continue to plague our country. Violence continues on our city streets; just this week somebody was stabbed on the sidewalk across from the Rectory during an argument. This past week we remembered the terrorist acts of 9/11. Atrocities continue to occur across the globe. Even our fellow Christian brothers and sisters act like Pharisees by passing judgement on those who act in ways they don't agree with. But, we can be like Moses and pray to God to change their hearts, to create a clean heart in others and renew a right spirit within them.

And for ourselves, we should never forget that Jesus said we all belong to his fold; we are all part of the fold, and even when we get lost, God looks for us like the woman who lost a coin or the shepherd who went after his one lost sheep. He does so because we are of priceless value to him. Amen.

Resources

Feasting on the Word for Proper 19 (Year C, Volume 4).

“Commentary on Luke 15:1-10” in http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2959.