

Scripture Reading Luke 15:1-7

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And 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? ⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶ 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.' ⁷ 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.

Sermon: "Looking for a lost sheep"

In today's lesson, we hear a familiar parable. A shepherd out with his flock of 100 sheep discovers that one is missing. So distraught by the loss of this one sheep that he leaves the 99 and goes in search of this "one". Jesus tells this parable in the gospel of Luke to tell of God's determination to keep and secure every soul that belongs to the Kingdom.

In my Old Testament Bible class, my professor talked about this parable, and he acted out the shepherd's actions in front of the entire class. He would reach down and pick up the imaginary sheep, placing it on his shoulders once it was found. Front legs on one side and back legs on the other, showing how he rushed back to the village and proclaim to all the people who would listen that he had found His sheep and wanted them to come and celebrate with him; it was moving. The professor's storytelling shows the urgency and power of this parable. He was trying to convey the same thing that Jesus was. This is the nature of God, enacted amid everyday human life. What a powerful image that is God searching for a lost soul. We tend to think of ourselves, individually, as the helpless little sheep lost in the wilderness, and then Jesus comes to find us and bring us home.

As the church body, we tend to see ourselves as the shepherd that searches for that lost sheep, hoping against hope that we might find that "one" and bring it back to the fold. But we rarely see ourselves as the 99 sheep safe and secure among the flock.

This morning I want us to think, for a moment, about the corporate dimension of this parable. There is beauty in the image of that "one" sheep being brought back home to be among us. Because as that shepherd returns over the horizon holding that sheep on his shoulders, we are again complete, a whole community. And being whole, we erupt in a joyous celebration because the "one" has now come home. Although our modern world tells the shepherd that it is better to stay with the 99 and let the one be lost so as not to lose another of the flock while he searches. This parable shows the determination of the shepherd, which is the metaphor for Jesus himself. What a pleasure it is to be in that community. Amen!?

In reality, we have seen ourselves as each of these characters within this parable.

We have been that lost sheep, separated from the 99, scared, alone, and full of doubt. We have been, deep in our soul, shaded by sin, separated from our spiritual family and God. We have been the shepherd, hearing the call from the 99 that one is missing, journeying to find that one who is scared, alone, and full of doubt. We sat beside them while they were mourning the loss of a loved one, struggling with an addiction, suffering the loss of a job, or having a health crisis. We have held their hand, we have prayed with them, and we have prayed for them. We have assured them that the 99 and God have their backs and they are not alone. And we have been the 99; those who are not necessarily on the front lines searching for that one lost sheep but are actively seeking the best for the "one" through prayer. As the 99, we have gathered supplies for the homeless, blankets for the cold, and food for the hungry, all in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, the Holy Spirit enables the body of Christ to "act" as that shepherd, helping, seeking, and guiding the lost sheep back to the fold. In this parable, we see the determination of the shepherd to find the lost sheep; it is mirrored in the determination of God, who, in Jesus Christ, has come to seek and save the lost. God tells us this much, even in the days of the prophets. [Ezekiel 34: 11] listen, "for thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out." And God does it through the Body, which is the church.

As I began writing this sermon, I felt compelled by the spirit to return to the passage again. Even after contemplating all this imagery of the 99, the shepherd, and the "one" lost sheep, I returned to the lesson. And low and behold, just like an OT prophet story, I found a WOE. A warning for us to contemplate in the midst of a celebration story. So, let's look at the lesson again, and I want to look at the first two verses. Listen, "now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him" (him being Jesus), and the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" One can feel the contempt in the words of the Pharisees. It is the words of someone who sees themselves as better than someone else, or it could be the words of someone so insecure that they must put others down to make themselves feel better.

This is the warning for us today. In this passage, the Pharisees and the scribes that Jesus is speaking to represent the church body of his day. They were the law keepers, the ones in power, and those who claimed to have God's support. They were the 99. But just like all the Prophets of the OT, Jesus is standing there calling them out for their hypocrisy. God is not interested in how we are perceived in the community; God is not interested in whether we appear to be clean, upright, proper members of the community.

Being a Christian is not status; it is not a Right given to us because our parents were Christians, our grandparents took us to church, or because we can claim "we grew up in these walls." And we should never allow our beliefs to raise us high enough to look down on the tax collectors and

sinner. Or, to put it in today's terms, our beliefs should never enable us to look down on someone because of their political beliefs, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation or allow us to point out what is different about them to make us feel better.

God cares about how we function in the kingdom. How do we treat the Tax Collector? How have we treated the unwashed, unclean, and unloved in our community?

[Saying I heard this week] The test of Christianity is not loving Jesus; It's loving Judas.

Today this church celebrates its homecoming. This is a time of celebration, but it is also a time of reflection, and it should be a call to action because Douglas Presbyterian Church can be any of the characters found in today's lesson. Douglas Presbyterian Church can be the Pharisees and the scribes, or Douglas Presbyterian Church can be the 99 who wait in prayer, or Douglas Presbyterian Church can act as the body of Christ in a world that tries to separate the one from the 99.

- Place yourself in this parable. Be honest about how you see your part. How do you contribute to the story?
- Are you the shepherd working in the Holy Spirit? Are you one of the 99 being the support staff, praying, working behind the scenes?
- Are you the lost sheep that needs to find its way home, searching the horizon for the shepherd, lost, alone, and afraid?

No matter how you see yourself in this parable, rest assured that God is our shepherd. And it is God's imperative nature to seek us out and bring us home, to be safe in the fold of the 99. Praise God that we are blessed with such a promise; let us pray.

Oh God, you are the shepherd, seeking that one lost soul while we, the 99, pray you actively keep looking. We thank you for the shelter of home, we thank you for the peace of home, and we thank you for the refuge which You provide in abundance. Not only here but in life to come; what a joyous reminder. As we move on from this day of remembrance, of this day of celebration, this day of looking forward, keep in our hearts the parable of the one lost sheep to help remember us that you made us all no matter our skin color, no matter our language, no matter our faults. You made us in your image, and we should reflect that image into the world. May the Holy Spirit keep us searching the horizon for that lost sheep and the shepherd in the name of Jesus Christ; we pray. Amen!