

The lost sheep Luke 15:1-10 September 2019

### SLIDE – LOST SHEEP

If you lost one of your sheep, wouldn't you go to the ends of the earth to find that precious one and bring it back to the flock? Here we have this image of a shepherd risking his life for the sake of the sheep. I grew up in a small farm culture where we knew our cattle, sheep, pigs or chickens, and they were precious to us. In this image the sheep is not only lost but in peril. I grew up in a small farm culture where we knew our cattle, sheep, pigs or chickens, and they were precious to us. There the land was fairly flat. We had some small hills but no mountains or cliffs to scale. Sometimes we had to track down a cow that had gotten through a fence line. They were never really lost, but instead were enjoying the freedom of new fields.

Jesus tells stories of a lost sheep and a lost coin. God is compelled to scour the wilderness and the whole house to find the one who is lost. The lost sheep and the lost coin are treasured by the One who searches. Such love is more than we can comprehend. We like these stories because we like to imagine that if we were lost, God would expend every effort to find us. We love to be the recipients of God's grace.

Jesus tells this story as tax collectors and sinners were coming near to him. The scripture says Jesus welcomed sinners. Sinners were those who came to the place of worship being humbled before God and seeking forgiveness. In considering this story you may have heard that tax collectors were outsiders when it came to the faith community. I think it is possible to view them as credible Jews who worked for Rome and so the faith community questioned their allegiance but that they were not sinners because of their job. That softens the text a bit. If a tax collector did think of themselves first while neglecting their neighbor, it was a common type of sin. Any person of faith could be found guilty of such thinking. Jesus tells this story as common people were coming near to him. They hung on his every word.

### SLIDE - GRUMPY

Also nearby were the guardians of the rules of faith and life. They had dedicated their lives to following God's word. They grumbled as they watched people gather to repent and listen to Jesus. They had been watching Jesus and had seen how he healed people when the guardians thought he should have been observing holy time. Jesus lifted up humble service. The guardians liked being known for their expertise and didn't appreciate Jesus' posture. Jesus spoke up for those who had no voice, power or position in society. Jesus gave out of the abundance of life that is the divine's character.

The Pharisees and scribes, the guardians, grumbled as they watched Jesus. Jesus' way did not fit their understanding. Don't get me wrong. Their deep respect for Godly ways and careful obedience to the law is commendable. What Jesus said and did felt like a challenge causing them to consider serious amendments to their lives. When we are given new information which needs to be incorporated into our lives and we don't see the value right off, we grumble, too.

The Pharisees and scribes were judging Jesus and those who came near to him and found them not worthy. When we look around at others, do we see people we judge to be not worthy or in error, or do we see lost ones who need care and compassion? Do we see people to write off as not worth our time and effort, or people who are lost and in need of welcome?

Jesus tells stories of lost ones being found by One whose love is beyond human ability to understand. Jesus tells stories and these are pure grace. This is important, since I have lamented a couple times lately that the reading from the gospels contained no grace or good news. Here we have only good news!

Barbara Brown Taylor has a story which helps us bring the parable into the present time. Taylor and her husband went on into the wilderness on a ten-day hike. They did not know anyone on the hike ahead of time, not the trip leader nor any of the 15 participants. The group was a motley crew coming from all over the United States and they all had different levels of ability when it came to hiking. Taylor writes, "Some of us charged ahead while others lagged behind, and while we encouraged one another along, we soon learned that we could only travel as fast as our slowest member."

Pat was her name. Besides being the slowest, she was also the oldest, the heaviest and the most unpleasant. She didn't mind being at the tail end of the group but another was usually paired with her. When she was within conversational range, she often corrected others whether it was about grammar, geography, history, botany or anything anyone else was talking about. She was determined to take a full hour for lunch no matter that everyone else was ready to proceed. Wherever they stopped it was either too sunny or too wet or too steep.

#### SLIDE - WILDERNESS

About the fifth day into the wilderness the group got very lost. They hiked for over 10 hours over three mountains before they made camp. When they arrived it was already dark, it was raining and they were in the middle of nowhere, and Pat was not with the group. The last person who had contact with her had last seen her at noon. He had been assigned to bring up the rear but moved away from her when she had thrown rocks at him and told him to leave her alone. Now no one had seen her for eight hours.

No one could imagine heading back up the last mountain to look for her. But it was the trip leader's responsibility, so he did it. He headed out with hot soup, a jacket and a first aid kit. Everyone else milled around anxiously imagining what it must be like to be lost in the wilderness without light or a map or a friend.

#### SLIDE - RECONCILED

It was around midnight when Pat stumbled into the campsite hanging on to her shepherd. Whatever frustrations the group had earlier were suddenly dissipated. She was welcomed with open arms, hugs, and mugs of hot chocolate. No one asked if she had learned her lesson. All were incredibly glad to have her back safe and sound. Surely as the group had waited and imagined what it was like for her out in the dark, they had all been somewhat lost themselves. "Finding her was as good as being found." Who is to say what repentance and reconciliation and rejoicing look like, or whether or not you can actually distinguish one from the other. In that moment of welcome, they were all fairly blended. Pat who was lost was found. The hiking group that had written her off were also found out, and regretful and relieved.

#### SLIDE – PRIUS OR PICKUP

It makes me think of the troubles we have with civil discussions these days. We seem to jump to conclusions by what we see rather than taking the time to actually walk with one another. Sociological studies indicate that we are endlessly judging each other and discounting one another by virtue of what we see or what we experience on the surface. We are not aware that each of us responds in automatic ways that make us prefer one thing over the other. That is, we think little and are more often governed by how we feel than by taking time to think and evaluate and wonder. So you drive a Prius? That means

you must be ABC. So you drive a pickup truck? That means you must be XYZ. We ignore what we truly know, that to really consider the value of another person demands that we spend lots of time listening, wondering and even questioning our own agendas before we make hard decisions. Even then we may find ourselves surprised by the other and the ways they change.

We have lost the ability to trust that we can be civil with one another, and that we are bound by more than our opinions. We have lost the ability to talk about issues from different angles and I fear it is eating away at the very things which could save us. When we judge others as different from us we suffer the loss of the awareness that we are more alike than the differences we highlight.

Jesus brought people together in him. Jesus welcomed the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus accepted the invitations of Pharisees. Jesus engaged women and men in conversations of faith. Jesus welcomed all and allowed for them to be and adjust and learn and change. What is our response to such welcome?

In Taylor's story of hiking she says that Pat did not comment on anything as she was welcomed that night she was found. But the next morning she was up and dressed and on the trail before the rest of the group. The group now accepted her and she was definitely a part of the flock, still not everyone's favorite member, but part of the flock. Of course she denied ever being afraid for even a moment. Yet, she was changed and the group was changed.

It is difficult not to judge others today, to decide that their opinions means they are our enemies, and decide that they are beyond our efforts, and right them off as not worth our time. It is easier to give our limited attention to those who are like us, to those who will feed us and ignore those who cause us trouble or differing or too much time. But when all you have is time, things happen.

The group was still out hiking and living more freely and comfortably with Pat. And as it turns out, she also was living more freely and comfortably with them. In fact one evening, she broke out in song leading the group in old camp tunes. In a very real way, they all joined in rejoicing their new found awareness of comradery.

#### SLIDE – JUMPING PEOPLE

Jesus said, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the 99 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."

"The parable presents a main figure—the owner, not the sheep—who realizes he has lost something of value to him. He notices the single missing sheep among the 99 in the wilderness. For him, the missing sheep, whether it is one of a hundred or a million, makes the flock incomplete. He engages in an exaggerated search, and when he has found the sheep, he engages in an equally exaggerated sense of rejoicing, first by himself and then with his friends and neighbors. If this fellow can experience such joy in finding one of a hundred sheep, what joy do we experience when we find what we have lost? More, if he can realize that one of his hundred had gone missing, do we know what or whom we have lost?

When was the last time we took stock, or counted up who was present rather than simply counted on their presence? Will we take responsibility for the lost, and what effort will we make to find them?

If we do notice who is lost, what do we say? What if to our surprise they show up? Will we shame them or welcome them home into our fellowship?

Chiefly what God wants is for us to rejoice in him and with him. And he wants us to rejoice with one another and share in the abundant life which he offers. That is making heaven on earth. God wants us to celebrate in all our diversity and complexity. Jesus welcomes all, you and me, the Pat's of the world, all. And it is time to rejoice!