



“99 to 1”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

March 15, 2006

This third week of Lent our text comes to us from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 18:1-14. As we continue to listen to the lessons of Jesus in this season that calls us to take a step back from our routines and a hard look within, in our passage today Christ offers his disciples and each of us a great deal of food for thought. Our text begins with a response of Jesus to a question of the disciples- who quickly learn their lesson that when you ask Jesus something, you'd better be prepared to get an honest, and often difficult answer. Jesus has already accused the disciples in this gospel of being hard of head and heart when it comes to understanding his messages, so he certainly doesn't hold back here.

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes! If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire. Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”

It was shortly before midnight in the hospital a few years ago when I was called to the room of a patient who was actively dying and pleading to see a chaplain. The nurses had not expected him to live through the week, a fact that he and his family were well aware of. Though he remained relatively alert, his body was slowly shutting down. He was 42. When I arrived at the room several family members lingering in the hallway greeted me with exhausted nods. We spoke quietly for a few minutes about how they felt he was holding on to something that was tormenting him but that he refused to share with anyone, and I went inside. His frailty was startling, as was the strength with which he grasped my hand when I sat in the chair beside where he lay, and the depth of grief that saturated his eyes as well as the urgency in his whisper of a voice. With heavy sobs and pregnant tears streaming down his cheeks he told me of how he was afraid to die. Not because it would mean leaving his family. Not because of all that would be left undone in his life. But because of his sin. And his fear that God's grace wouldn't possibly cover all of it. He agreed that God's goodness was great, but believed the depth of his brokenness was even greater. We talked for a little over an hour about God and grace, fear and promises, and the depth of our sinfulness rivaled and surpassed only by the depth of Christ's love and ended with a prayer of confession and gratitude to

God, with tears now streaming down both of our cheeks. A few hours later after his family had said goodnight and goodbye, in the early hours of the morning he drifted off to sleep never to open his eyes to this world again.

Christ delivers an unflinching word about what is required of those who desire to enter into the kingdom of God. The challenge he presents is certainly one of surrender first- to become humble as a child. In that day that meant becoming as one who was weak and vulnerable, as well as one who had no legal advocate or rights in society- a nonperson in the eyes of the law and the culture as it were. But the subtext of Jesus' comparison bubbles just beneath the surface and it is not lost on the reader that 'to become like a little child is to take seriously the call to humility- it is not just to become vulnerable, but to give up the pretense of self-importance and independence that we stake so much of our lives and livelihoods on. It is to let up on our insistence on self reliance and instead turn in trust to God as our heavenly parent, rather than trusting in ourselves. It is to abandon our quest for status and accept that we already have a place in the family of God regardless of the weakness of our abilities or our faith.'¹

With Christ's own acknowledgment that stumbling blocks abound, even with just a quick look within ourselves at our predisposition toward sinfulness and away from all of these other things and you would think that this call to humility would be an easy one. We encounter obstacles in our faith and our life each and every day that we cannot will our way out of or find our way around. We get trapped in self-defeating cycles of doing the very thing that we hate. We set up pitfalls for others so that our own abilities might be showcased and are threatened when the light of another begins to outshine our own. You would think that this call to humility and acceptance of the fact that we have already been accepted by God and have nothing to prove would be an easy one, but its not. Even with Christ's warning that we put ourselves and our very place in the kingdom at risk when we refuse to look at our own sinful state and forget to try actively to overcome it, even with this we prefer to take the route of self pity rather than self examination. Sure we casually confess our sins on Sunday morning, but do we ever really stop to take stock of every corner of our lives to see where stumbling blocks may be getting the better of us, or where we ourselves may be laying them out hoping that others will fall?

Christ does not wish for the disciples or for us to become so accustomed to our sinfulness and resigned to the fact that we are fallen that we disregard the fact that we are still responsible for it. But neither does he desire for us to be locked in agony over the power of sin so much so that the power of God's grace seems to pale in comparison. Rather, Christ calls us to take a careful look within where we cannot help but find humility if we are being honest with ourselves, and instead of being overcome with shame or paralyzed by fear of punishment or being cast out of the kingdom, he suggests that what we find there can be transformed into an opportunity to be drawn back to God. "If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never

¹Leander Keck, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary- Matthew*, p. 374.

went astray.”

In this pithy little parable Jesus shares with us a little about ourselves, and a lot about God. It is not that the one sheep is any more valuable than the others- quite the contrary, if you are going for volume, a shepherd would almost have to be crazy to leave 99 in search of the one. It is just that God is in the business of bringing back the lost. Jesus said, I came not to heal those who are well but to heal those who are sick. In the same way, God is not content to rejoice in the many who stay so close to his side, but rather seeks after those who have strayed and need to be restored. And when the lost one is found, then that is cause for true celebration in the kingdom. This is good news for us because all we like sheep have gone astray. And we are invited by Christ in this passage and given the opportunity in this season to take a painful look at the sin that seeks to separate us from the fold, to claim it and confess it so that we can understand the power of a God that is actively out seeking after us not in spite of that sin, but because of it. That is a crazy kind of love! To be sure, sin is a powerful and persistent reality, but God’s grace is more powerful and more persistent. By the grace of God, disobedient people become partners in an everlasting covenant with the Lord. By the grace of God, a murderer like Paul is transformed into an ambassador for Christ. By the grace of God, the dubious disciples become the rock on which Christ would build his church.² And in Jesus’ life and in the lessons of Lent we see that in sin and suffering and death themselves God is constantly at work drawing us through these things to his side. And so we need not be ashamed and we need not be afraid. We just have to respond to the call of the one who goes out into the night looking for us, longing only for our safe return.

Psalm 51 may be our prayer for this season- weather we feel we need to pray it or not, because I can promise you that we do. It was written by King David who carried the sin of adultery and murder like a millstone around his neck. He writes, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.”

The joy of our salvation is truly this- that once we were lost, but now are found. May we find the courage to offer our sins honestly to the Lord, and carry out in our lives and in our church the same grace that was extended to each of us when we had gone astray. A grace that leaves the ninety and goes after the one. Amen.

²*Ibid, Psalms* p. 888.

