

The Lost Sheep
Luke 15:1-7
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Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were **grumbling** and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So he told them this parable: “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? 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, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ 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.”

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

*May the words of my mouth
and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.*

We've spent the past four weeks in this series on parables or the stories Jesus loved to tell, and if you're like me you've started to notice a somewhat disconcerting trend in Jesus' storytelling. These stories that Jesus LOVES to tell, well, they're not necessarily stories that we LOVE to hear. Even if they're stories that we know well, they don't have the same belovedness about them that the stories of Moses parting the Red Sea or Jonah being swallowed up by big fish or shepherds gathering around the manger-turned-cradle of the Christ child do.

Instead, these stories that Jesus loves to tell leave their hearers feeling unsettled. They challenge - even defy - the status quo and compel the listener to question everything she thought she knew about God and what it looks like to live in a way that pleases God.

If these parables were movies, they would be the art house films whose closing credits start to scroll up the screen before the plot lines are neatly wrapped up and the characters' lives are set on safe and predictable courses. They are, at least to many in the audience, unsatisfying.

Perhaps one of the most problematic things about parables is that they can deceive us with their subtle complexity. Jesus uses things like sheep, goats, coins, wayward sons, weddings, dinner parties - ordinary, familiar objects and experiences that we understand to teach his followers about something that is actually not so ordinary or familiar - the ways of God.

We tend not to understand the ways of God, but we want to - so we do whatever we can to figure out what Jesus is saying to us. The temptation is to think that when Jesus tells a parable, he's really just talking in code. And if it's just a code, then all we have to do is to break the code and we'll solve the puzzle, I mean, parable.

Let's use today's parable as an example. It's a good one because it's especially short and only has a few characters: the shepherd, the flock of sheep, and the one lost sheep. If we were to decode this parable, we could start by determining that the shepherd is God. That seems pretty obvious, doesn't it? The flock of sheep is the people who are obedient to God, and the one stray sheep is the person who isn't obedient, the SINNER, the bad guy.

Great. Now that we have that figured out, we can reason that the moral of the story or the meaning of the parable is that if you are a lost sheep (sinner - which you don't want to be because, well, then you'd be bad) then the shepherd (God) will come find you and all will be well. Done. Isn't that lovely? We are so smart. And you're welcome for the short sermon.

Except not really.

Not really. Which is basically what every parable says to its audience. It's what Jesus was saying to those Pharisees and scribes who were grumbling about the company he kept. You think you've got the corner on how God works? Not really. You think living faithfully can be reduced to ticking boxes on a checklist? Not really. You think your contentedness with how the world is equals God's contentedness with how the world is? Not really.

In spite of their brevity and familiar objects, parables challenge us to think about God and what it looks like to live faithfully in new ways.

Again, let's look at today's parable of the Lost Sheep.

Jesus poses that question to the crowd – “Which one of you, having one 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?”

Part of the genius of Jesus is that he asks this question in a way that presumes an affirmative answer even though when you stop to think about it that presumption is assuming a lot.

Now most of us are not familiar with having sheep, but we do have other things that are important to us, and we might even have one hundred of some of those things. One hundred Facebook friends, one hundred real life friends, one hundred books, one hundred dollars, one hundred photos from your favorite vacation, one hundred likes on your Instagram photo from that favorite vacation...

One hundred of anything is a lot to keep track of, and I know I would be hard-pressed to notice if one of one hundred of anything went missing...unless it were already counted for me or could be organized into neat stacks of ten.

So does it make sense to presume that a shepherd of one hundred sheep (who don't stay put like books and photos do) would notice when one was missing? Not really.

But that's what the shepherd in Jesus' parable – the one who represents God – does. He notices who is missing, and then he does something else that doesn't make much sense. He leaves the ninety-sheep by themselves to go find the one who is lost. He leaves them in the wilderness, a place that might bring to mind those stories of the Israelites who spent forty years wandering (and complaining) in the wilderness before they finally found their way to the promised land and that time when Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness in a battle of wits with the devil and his temptations. Seasons in the wilderness tend to be transformative and God uses those times for sure, but the wilderness is not where people typically choose to be nor is it where one would expect responsible caretakers to leave those for whom they are responsible.

But that shepherd – the one who represents God – does just that. How long will those ninety-nine be in the wilderness alone? He doesn't know. Will they stay together as a flock when he's not there? He doesn't know; though sheep behavior suggests that at least a few will wander away from the fold, leaving him down more than just one sheep. Who will take care of them while he's gone? He doesn't know. What that shepherd does know, though, is that one sheep is missing and his flock is incomplete without it.

The shepherd's behavior in Jesus' parable continues to surprise us. When he finds the sheep – and who knows how long he was searching for it – hours? days? longer? – his reaction is not what we might expect. However exhausted he is, and however frustrated he may have felt with this sheep who inconvenienced him, he doesn't get angry. He doesn't curse at the sheep or tell it how awful it is. He doesn't put the sheep in time out. He doesn't hit the sheep with his staff and tell it it needs to think about what it's done.

That lone sheep is the one, remember, who represents the sinner. The sinner is the one who has fallen short, who has disappointed, proven himself to be incapable of

keeping God's commandments as he should. And what does Shepherd God do when he finds Sheep Sinner? He picks up the sheep, rejoices, and carries it home to continue the celebration with his friends and family.

My guess is that most of us, if we were asked where we feel like we fit in this parable, would group ourselves in with the ninety-nine who aren't causing any trouble or in need of special attention. Statistically speaking, that's where most of us would fit, right?

According to statistics, yes; but according to the Gospel, not really. As people who seek to follow Jesus' example and always fall short, we are always the lost sheep, always the sinner.

We profess and understand ourselves to be sinners – never quite measuring up to what God hopes or expects of us. And for those of us who really like to measure up – whether it be on our report cards, the hierarchy of our workplace, or with the people in the pews with us on Sunday mornings – the thought of not measuring up, getting it wrong, or making a mistake is really difficult.

In our minds, not measuring up equals failure, which deserves punishment.

Those expectations around reward and punishment aren't something we've necessarily come up with by ourselves or in a vacuum.

From an early age, we are taught that our ability to perform and do well is indicative of our value and our worth. It's evident in classrooms where students who get good grades are praised and get certificates and students who struggle with their schoolwork get more work.

The corporate world operates on this reward/punishment system too. Major companies like Amazon, Yahoo, and IBM have been known for using the vitality curve as a primary management strategy. The vitality curve works on the premise that employees can be ranked according to their individual productivity. When it comes time for annual reviews, the bottom 5 or 10% employees are fair game for layoffs. Minimal productivity equals minimal worth to the company equals pink slip.

I would even contend that the church has been at fault for perpetuating this reward/punishment mindset. For many of us, we learned the stories of Scripture as children in Sunday School, and we learned them largely as stories of obedience. We learned about Abraham and were told he was obedient, so God loved him. We learned about Sarah and how she trusted God's promises, so God loved her. We learned about Moses and were told that he followed God's instructions, so God loved him.

But the fuller truth of those stories is that Abraham lied about his wife being his sister on two separate occasions, and God loved him anyway. And Sarah may have trusted in God, but she also told her husband to sleep with her maid when it didn't look like God's promise was going to be fulfilled, and God loved her anyway. And Moses killed a man and then argued with God repeatedly, and God loved him anyway.

So is it our obedience, and our ability to measure up that cause God to love us? The Pharisees would say yes; Jesus says, Not really. Not at all actually. God loves us because that is who God is. Maybe this parable is about a lost sheep, but it's just as much if not more about the Loving Shepherd who loves the sheep even though it was lost.

If the parables – including and especially the parable of the Lost Sheep – assure us of anything it is that God’s ways are not our ways nor are God’s thoughts our thoughts.

Maybe **that’s** why these are stories that Jesus loved to tell. Because Jesus wanted to free us from being trapped in this reward/punishment system that wasn’t really God’s intention in the first place. And these parables - these stories of a stranger going out of his way to care for an injured man; a landowner being abundantly, even absurdly, generous to workers who came to his vineyard late in the day; the sorting of those who cared for people in need and those who didn’t; and a shepherd going after one lost sheep who could have easily and even understandably been left behind, Jesus is giving us a preview of the kingdom of God.

Parables are not puzzles. They are not riddles to be solved or codes to be broken. They are stories. Stories about what it will be like when the kingdom of God comes in its fullness. Admittedly, we don’t know when that’s going to happen; there’s plenty of evidence in our world and in our community that it hasn’t happened yet. But that’s all the more reason why we need to hear these stories.

Those Pharisees and scribes who crowded in around Jesus couldn’t stand the thought that he would spend time with sinners, people they considered unworthy. What Jesus couldn’t stand was the thought that they considered themselves worthy, righteous on their own, which would mean they had no real need or appreciation for God’s grace. In all of their self-righteous grumbling, Jesus reminds them, “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.”

The gospel that Jesus preached – the gospel we continue to preach as Jesus’ disciples – is not for righteous people. Christianity is not for righteous people. It’s for people who mess up, who disappoint, who fail, who make bad decisions, who have to apologize, who made the same bad decision again, who struggle with addiction, who lose their jobs, who are blind to the needs of others, who hurt the people they love the most. It’s for the one who wanders away, gets lost, and needs special attention. Which means, my friends, it’s for us.