



Lost and Found

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ September 15, 2019*

Exodus 32:7-14

YHWH said to Moses, "Go down, now! These people whom you led out of Egypt have corrupted themselves! In such a short time, they have turned from the way that I have given them, and made themselves a molten calf. Then they worshipped it and sacrificed to it saying, 'Israel, here is your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!' YHWH then said to Moses, "I look at these people—how stubborn they are! Now leave me to myself so that my anger may pour out on them, and destroy them! But you I'll make into a great nation." Then Moses soothed the face of YHWH, his God. "But why, my God, should you let your wrath pour out on these people whom you delivered from Egypt with great might, with a strong hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'Their God intended to destroy them all along, to kill them in the mountains, to erase them from the earth?' Turn your back on your rage; reconsider the disaster you intended for your people. Do not forget Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca and Isaac, and Leah and Rachel and Jacob, your chosen ones, to whom you promised, 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky; I will give to you all this land which I have promised—I will give it to your descendants, and they will enjoy its inheritance forever.'" So YHWH relented, and the disaster that threatened the Israelites was forestalled.

Psalm 51:1-11

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| 1 | Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your loving-kindness; *
in your great compassion blot out my offenses. | | a sinner from my mother's womb. |
| 2 | Wash me through and through from my wickedness *
and cleanse me from my sin. | 7 | For behold, you look for truth deep within me, *
and will make me understand wisdom secretly. |
| 3 | For I know my transgressions, *
and my sin is ever before me. | 8 | Purge me from my sin, and I shall be pure; *
wash me, and I shall be clean indeed. |
| 4 | Against you only have I sinned *
and done what is evil in your sight. | 9 | Make me hear of joy and gladness, *
that the body you have broken may rejoice. |
| 5 | And so you are justified when you speak *
and upright in your judgment. | 10 | Hide your face from my sins, *
and blot out all my iniquities. |
| 6 | Indeed, I have been wicked from my birth, * | 11 | Create in me a clean heart, O God, *
and renew a right spirit within me. |

1 Timothy 1:12-17

I thank Christ Jesus our Savior, who has strengthened me, given me this work, and judged me faithful. I used to be a blasphemer, a persecutor, a violent man; but because in my unbelief I didn't know what I was doing, I have been treated mercifully, and the grace of our God has been granted to me in overflowing measure, as was the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Here's a saying that can be trusted and is worthy of your complete acceptance: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Of these I myself am the worst. But I was dealt with mercifully for this reason: so that in me—the worst case of all—Jesus Christ might demonstrate perfect patience; and so that I might become an example to those who would later have faith in Christ and gain everlasting life. To the Ruler of ages, the immortal, the invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever! Amen.

Luke 15:1-10

As soon as it was daybreak the chief priests, the elders and religious scholars and the whole Sanhedrin reached a decision. They bound Jesus and led him away, and handed him over to Pilate, who interrogated him. "Are you the King of the Jews?" he asked. Jesus responded, "You are the one who is saying it." The chief priests then brought many accusations against him. Pilate interrogated Jesus again: "Surely you have some answer? See how many accusations they are leveling against you!" But to Pilate's astonishment, Jesus made no further response. Now

whenever there was a festival, Pilate would release for them one prisoner—anyone they asked for. There was a prisoner named Barabbas who was jailed along with the rioters who had committed murder in the uprising. When the crowd came to ask that Pilate honor the custom, Pilate rejoined, “Do you want me to release for you the King of the Jews?” Pilate was aware, of course, that it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over.

This morning we find ourselves in the part of Luke's Gospel where everything is wonderful. Beginning with the story today of the lost sheep and the lost coin and ending in the next passage with the story of the prodigal son, it is all good news. The lost sheep is returned to the flock, the lost coin and the lost son are found, and an all-night party begins. God's determination to find us, God's talent for finding us, proves greater than our talent for getting lost, and there is joy in heaven and on earth.

These stories are beloved—probably because we like to put ourselves in the place of the sheep that gets found. I am the exhausted terrified lamb that is gently placed around the shoulders of the shepherd and carried home, so thrilled to be found and so full of gratitude that I never wander away again. Or I am the coin, stuck under the radiator and covered in cat fur and dust (maybe that's just my house) until the good woman comes along, finds me, and fishes me out—bringing me from darkness to light. These are my stories and I love them.

In their original context, though, these stories would not have sounded like such good news. If you remember, the set up for these parables is Jesus being criticized yet again by the Pharisees for hanging out with lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes—and worse than just hanging out with them, he is eating with them. He has “received” them returning their hospitality and receiving them as any host would receive a guest. The sinners are fascinated—no one has ever treated them like this before, so whatever this man has to say, whatever he is going to do, they want to be there with him. They come closer as he invites them in and the Pharisees and scribes blow a gasket.

From our 2000 years after the fact perspective, Jesus is just being, Jesus-y. He is doing his good shepherd “thing”. And it is heartwarming and lovely to think of how many unfortunate souls he touches and helps—all those lepers and tax collectors and prostitutes, all those sinners. But what if we substitute some modern day outcasts for those of Jesus' time? What if he was sitting in a booth at the Melrose Diner with a heroin dealer or an assault rifle seller—buying them dinner, chatting, laughing, clapping them on the back, while I am sitting in the next booth with some youth group members who look at the scene unfolding and say, “wait, is that who I think it is?” I imagine saying something like, “well, the good shepherd cares more for the one sheep that is lost than the 99 who are not”. But it sounds a bit “off” and I wonder if what they would hear is that to be lost is precious in the sight of God, and that their good behavior provokes less joy in heaven than the repentance apparently taking place in the next booth. How do you articulate that to a kid?

Because that is exactly how it sounds to the scribes and the Pharisees. They are true believers. People who do not merely talk about God but live according to God's ways, scrupulously obedient to the law. It isn't easy, but part of the reason they do it is to set an example. They are trying to offer a healthy, wholesome alternative to the ways of the world, showing people it is possible and pleasing to live according to God's ways. They do think about sinners, but they think the best way to help them is to hold a high standard, inviting them to achieve it and pointing out to them where they fall short so they are challenged to be the best they can be. Some have what it takes. Some, sadly, just don't. And mixing the two just isn't helpful. We need to have clear rules, with clear rewards for those who obey. The winners are admitted to the ranks of the educated, employed, the righteous, and the sinners, the losers, well, they get to keep trying until they get it right. Everyone sticks with their own kind. The righteous know that they are giving heaven daily reasons for rejoicing and the sinners know that they are grieving the heart of God—if God even knows who they are.

Then Jesus shows up and starts messing around with all the carefully drawn lines, breaking all the rules. Starts treating sinners like special cases and making them think they are just as important as other people. Dangerously robbing them of any motivation to just do better—why should they listen to the Pharisees about how to earn God's love if Jesus is just giving it away for free? All they need to do is whatever they want, wander wherever they want, and Jesus will come out to find them. Leaving all the good sheep to fend for themselves. This is not right. If you receive sinners and let the righteous fend for themselves what will happen to the community of faith? What about the good people? What about us?

One of the problems with these 2 parables is that they don't seem to mean what Jesus says they mean. What he says is that heaven rejoices over the repentance of one sinner. But from my read neither the lost sheep nor the lost coin repents. They are both simply found. Not because of anything they have done but because of the shepherd and the woman, because someone is determined to find them and does. They are restored thanks only to God's action, so how does repentance come into the picture?

I think there are 3 possibilities for repentance being thrown into the mix. First is that Jesus was simply telling a little story that means what it means and we shouldn't get too twisted about it. Second is that he was deliberately ambiguous and wants us to figure out for ourselves what is going on. But that caused the Gospel writers, his

editors, a nervous breakdown so they “fixed” the stories by explaining them. The third possibility is that these are not actually stories about sheep and coins but are about shepherds and sweepers. Which one of you, having a hundred sheep...? Jesus is not inviting the Pharisees to imagine themselves as sheep or coins. He is inviting them to imagine themselves as shepherds, leaving their carefully tended flock in order to chase one stray through the wilderness. If you are willing to entertain this possibility, to think of yourself as the shepherd character in the story, then it sounds quite different. Repentance is not the issue at all, but rejoicing. The plot is not about changing evil ways but about seeking, sweeping, finding, rejoicing. The story is not about Jesus endlessly trailing around after us as we wander from one wilderness to another, but about us joining Jesus in slogging through wild places and sweeping endlessly, going after the flock and the treasure. It is about questioning the whole idea that the lost need to do something before they are eligible to be found or to meet certain conditions before we will go looking for them. It is about trading our high standards for a powerful flashlight and our good examples for a good broom. It is about the joy of finding.

Perhaps some of us are destined to be shepherds and others of us to be lost sheep, but when I am working so hard to find and stay found, it is difficult not to judge those who seem intent on staying lost, who seem to thrive on it. I want to believe that they are not lost, but bad—somehow deserving of lostness. People I can write off and save myself the grief of trying to find them, of worrying about them. I would rather focus on the righteous, the good people, the ones who are staying still in hopes of being found, or prancing in the field hoping that catches the shepherd’s attention. I think about heaven ignoring all of those good people in favor of one sinner who accidentally or possibly deliberately wanders off over and over again, and I want to give God a piece of my mind. But then, then I hear someone behind me calling my name, I see big brown hands coming towards me, grabbing me by the scruff of my neck, hauling me through the air and onto shoulders that smell of grass and sunshine and home. And I am so surprised, so relieved to be FOUND that my heart feels like it is being broken into, broken open, and I find myself wanting to go with this shepherd, helping to find the lost. Meanwhile way off in the distance I hear the wild and raucous sound of angels rejoicing.

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