

15 All the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus to listen to him. 2 The Pharisees and legal experts were grumbling, saying, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

3 Jesus told them this parable: 4 "Suppose someone among you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them. Wouldn't he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he is thrilled and places it on his shoulders. 6 When he arrives home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost sheep.' 7 In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives. -Common English Bible

I think it has been while since I've offered you any teaching on what a parable is. We've had parables a few times this season already and yet another today so I think it's a good time for a refresher. Parables appear to have been one of Jesus' favorite teaching tools. "The word 'parable,' from the Greek word *parabole*, means, literally, 'that which is tossed alongside,' implying a comparison, an analogy, an elaboration, or an illustration. Perhaps the best-known and most helpful definition of a parable has been provided by C.H. Dodd: 'At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought'" (Craddock, 108). So they are stories or sayings that toss ordinary things of this world alongside spiritual matters or questions. They are something like a simile or a metaphor, not so much puzzles to be solved as prods to active thought. Not clear, teasers... Part of the difficulty we have with the parables of Jesus is that many have become so familiar that we barely hear them. There is nothing arresting about them. They are more like elevator music than a horn demanding our attention. Most of us have spent less time with the fig tree parable so perhaps that one worked on us a bit last week, nudged us, teased us, prodded us... but I suspect this week could be more challenging. How many songs have we sung throughout our lives of faith about tender shepherds? How many artistic renderings have we seen of a shepherd with kind eyes carrying a sheep on his shoulders? Of course the man goes to great lengths to find his poor, lost sheep. That's what shepherds do, we think.

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Do we have any shepherds in the room? Or anyone with significant experience in sheep herding? I think we have difficulties with Jesus' parables both because of overfamiliarity AND under familiarity. What do most or perhaps even all of us know about shepherds and sheep? Some of you know about fig trees, but sheep? I saw a lot of sheep in Scotland this summer and many of you have traveled in sheep filled lands. But I want you to try today, to really pay attention to this story, and realize how shocking it is. Truly. It is not a lilting elevator tune, I promise.

It's always important to know the context in which a parable is told. It is, I suppose, what the metaphor is thrown alongside. In this case, you have two groups of people, one drawing close to Jesus and listening to him as the disciples were commanded to do on the transfiguration mountain, and one standing apart. grumbling. The group drawing near is tax collectors and sinners. We frequently understand this collective as societal outcasts or rejects, but scholars helped me see this week that these were people who "have violated the welfare of family and community and thus walked out of home and community. We typically today do not use the term 'outcast' to speak of arms dealers, loansharks, insider traders, or collaborationists with occupation governments, but they would be the modern equivalents of Jesus' audience. 'Sinners' can also refer to the immoral in general, and the sexually immoral in particular." (Levine and Witherington, 410). We turn the other group, the pharisees and legal experts into cartoon villains, but wouldn't we join them in objecting to Jesus surrounding himself with people like the first group? Think about the most reprehensible criminals you can imagine, those we would consider has having walked betrayed and endangered and abandoned home and community. Picture these at Jesus' knee. Would you not scoff a bit, shudder, pull back? Would you not suspect Jesus of being unfaithful to the well being of the community? Modern churches frequently bristle at the presence of far less offensive people. Here at St. A's we've resisted welcoming unhoused people into our building or parking lot, citing the need to protect our neighbors and community.

Jesus' parable of the lost sheep, or as the scholars guiding me call it, "The parable of the counting, seeking, finding, celebrating sheep owner" raises some real questions

about this priority of community protection. It's actually a rather extravagantly reckless story. Let's consider. A man owns 100 sheep. Ok, so this man is wealthy. This is a substantial herd in Jesus' time. One of these sheep wanders away. Here's the first point at which my mind is teased into active thought. How did he know? How does one count 100 moving sheep who all look basically the same? I have been trying to get going on a knitting project and I'm having trouble counting 81 unmoving, fuzzy stitches on a needle. I can't imagine counting 100 potentially moving fuzzy beasts, and knowing, with certainty, that one, just one is missing. We have songs and other scripture that suggests the shepherd knows his sheep and the sheep know the shepherd. But we're not even told in this parable that the man is shepherd, he's a sheep owner. These counting skills, they seem rather like Jesus' characterization of God, right? He counts the hairs on our head?

It gets even more trippy. Hang on. So Jesus asks "Wouldn't he leave the other ninety-nine in the pasture and search for the lost one until he finds it?" Ok, something is obscured in this translation- the word translated "pasture" is elsewhere in Luke translated "wilderness." As another scholar notes, "It is an old gospel song, not in Luke, that the ninety nine safely lay sheltered in the fold. If the ninety- nine are safe in a fold, then the search for one lost sheep is but an act of frugality, an exercise of common sense, It is foolish not to act when there is a possibly gain with no possibility of loss. But how is one to assess the search by a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine in the wilderness? Either the shepherd is foolish or the shepherd loves the lost sheep and will risk everything, including his own life, until he finds it" (Craddock, 185). If he owned a hundred sheep, he could afford to lose one. Almost everyone hearing this story would have said "No, Jesus, he wouldn't do that." I read somewhere this week that it is common practice for shepherds to shoot wandering sheep so they don't lead others astray. But leaving your 99 exposed, in the wilderness, to find and save one? This is reckless; it is community and property endangerment. Are you being teased into thought yet?

There's more. "When he finds it" not "If he finds it," "When." This sheep owner will not fail. When he finds the sheep what will he do? Put it on his shoulders to

bring it back. Ok, again, I've seen so many paintings of lambs wrapped around shoulders, but this is not a lamb. It is a sheep. And I googled it, what is the average weight of a sheep— 90-300 pounds. This sheep owner takes minimally nearly 100 pounds on his shoulders for the journey back home, presumably leaving the 99 in the wilderness all along. Perhaps it is easier to ensure the sheep stays with you this way, but there's nothing easy about this. I used to carry Caroline on my shoulders. I think I stopped before she hit 60 pounds. So think about this, the sheep owner risks all he has to find one that has wandered from the flock, and he bears the weight of that one for the journey back.

And if that's not extravagant enough, there's more. He throws a party, inviting his neighbors and friends, to celebrate the return of the lost sheep. Meanwhile the 99 fend for themselves? Who knows? The focus is on the lost and found, not the never lost. And lest his listeners miss it, Jesus says "In the same way, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who changes both heart and life than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives."

Who are these righteous people who have no need to change their hearts and lives? Have you met any? I've met people who seem to think they are, but typically this is certainty is part of what needs to change in their hearts and lives. Jesus said it quite plainly, "No one is good, but God alone." No one. This does not mean we are wretched. If we are on the road with Jesus, if we've been trying to follow Jesus for years, decades even, we may have many good moments, we may get it right more often than not. But even those who have been on the road with Jesus for decades have moments of feeling quite lost and broken. Most of us have character traits, in 12 step groups they call them character defects, that are bugaboos are whole life through. We make progress, but don't attain perfection this side of glory. No one does.

But that's why today's parable is such good news, because it suggests that God goes to the most extreme lengths to find us when we're lost, God takes our weight upon Godself, and throws a party and when we're found. We don't have to be perfect. We don't have to never stray. Our faith teaches us about the perseverance

of the saints and the irresistibility of grace. Whether you identify more with the sin of those who gathered around Jesus to listen to him or the sin of those who stood off to the side grumbling, God's grace is for you. Whether you are burning with the shame of a big mistake made, or glowing with having gotten something right this week, God's grace is for you. Wherever you are at the moment on the spectrum between righteousness and mercy, God's grace is for you. God seeks and finds the lost and all of us, at some times, in some ways, are the lost. And God rejoices when the lost come home, when there is a return to safety and wholeness. Thanks be to God.

Sources in addition to scripture that were cited in or influenced this sermon:
Fred Craddock. *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.
Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III. *The Gospel of Luke in New Cambridge Bible Commentary Series*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018.