

Finding Our Way Home

Luke 15.1-7

September 12, 2010

“As the shepherd rejoices over the lamb brought home, so will God rejoice. Such is God’s character: he wants the lost to be redeemed, because they are his; their wanderings have grieved him, and he rejoices at their return home.”

- Joachim Jeremias (adapted)

Reading

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ²And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ ³So he told them this parable: ⁴‘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? ⁵When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. ⁶And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” ⁷Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

I must apologize for this sermon introduction, which is weak at best. I would have worked harder to compose a slam dunk introduction, but I was intrigued by a new computer game and just didn’t have the time. My only excuse is that the parable on which this sermon is based – the parable of the Lost Sheep - reminds me of a computer game. Computer games are multi-leveled, and you have to master level one before gaining access to level two. This parable, in similar fashion, has levels of meaning, but the second level is accessible only after mastering the first; it will make no sense to you until you have been properly introduced to the first. Because of this, I would like to approach this parable as a game and examine its levels of meaning in hope that your spiritual life will be enriched in new ways as we delve deeper into its meaning.

The first level of meaning is one with which we are all familiar. It is a statement of the fathomless depths of God’s love for you, for me, and for each and every individual who has

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walked, now walks, or will at some point in the distant future walk under God's blue skies. It is hard to overemphasize the significance of this love. It means that nothing in the entire world – including the world itself! - means more to God than you; and God is willing to put everything at risk to find and bring you home from your wandering, and embrace you in love. That, my friends, is why we can sing with excitement and passion as our Invitation to Worship this morning suggested; because the news *is* good.ⁱ Otherwise stated, God loves you and there ain't a cotton pickin' thing you can do about it. I don't know why Jesus didn't use this language; it works, at least it does for a Southern boy! However that may be, it is true that you are as important to God as all things combined, and God will spare no effort to find you and help you find your way home.

Okay, have you mastered this first level? Do you have its number? Can you take full advantage of it? I hope so, because nothing is more important. The problem with this first level, however, as with so many familiar things, is that we have a tendency to take it for granted. Over time it loses its punch in our life, and becomes overlooked altogether. Thus, it is important to return to this level time and again, to recognize and feel the boundless love of God for you.

If you have mastered this level, you can advance to the next, which is equally profound but more challenging. It is more challenging precisely because at the next level of meaning the passionate love of God of which this parable speaks is not about you, it's about someone else. To be honest it's about anyone else, including and perhaps especially those people whom you don't particularly like, or don't particularly understand; those people whom you really don't want to have much to do with at all.

This is the context of this parable in Luke's gospel; Jesus is seen dining with a bunch of tax collectors and sinners – that is to say, folk quite lax in their religious practice – who were deemed unworthy of God's attention. They didn't go to synagogue; well, hardly ever. They didn't tithe. They lacked the religious and moral sensitivity of the religious elite; the Pharisees, scribes, and the like. These guys were BMAS's - Big Men at Synagogue - proud leaders who were highly educated, well placed, and thus influential with others. You can bet they served on this and that committee... and then some. You can bet they were always present writing big checks, praying aloud with emotional sincerity... and then some. They were worthy of adulation

and emulation... and then some. What in the world was Jesus doing associating with this riff-raff, the very dregs of society! He was eating with them like they were... Pharisees! He acted like he respected and accepted them!

Noticing their concern Jesus shared the parable of the Lost Sheep, clearly intending that God's love embraces everyone, including the tax collectors and sinners; that God esteems them as God esteems the Pharisees (and yes, God esteems the Pharisees); and that God would risk the entire flock in the effort to find any one of them, and help them find their way home. Simply put, they count too; these tax collectors and sinners. We may not like them, we may not understand them, but they also mean as much to God as the entire world and God will not rest until they are gathered home.

They count too, these seemingly awkward, socially unacceptable types; but unless we have mastered the first level we will not recognize this, much less reach out to them. Until we have been transformed by God's boundless love that strengthens, empowers, and emboldens us, we will never manage to reach out properly to such as these.

Such as these... I have to tell you, they have haunted my spirit these past days. Such as these... they get lost in the shuffle when bridges are being burned between people, when wedges are driven between people, when hatred and vilification seem to be the order of the day. In times like this - times like those in which we find ourselves - people are rejected, vilified, demonized, and finally dismissed altogether... because they are deemed unworthy of attention.

In our day, to cite but one example, the self-righteous worthy are so brazen as to declare God's *hatred* for those with whom they disagree. God's hatred? To what God do they refer? The Creator of all? The Father of Jesus? The God who can be characterized by one word, love? I don't think so. I don't know this God of hate and brazen discrimination. But I have learned from the life and teaching of Jesus that these others count too. They are children of God who go by many names, come in many colors and orientations, and God loves each of them. Thus, we too should honor and accept them, seeking ways not to burn but to build bridges between us; to approach them not with the assumption of confrontation but in hope of dialogue and understanding.

This is the path to which Jesus has called us... but I don't see it reflected in recent events. The tragic events of 9/11 have been on my heart this week. I tried very, very hard to reflect on and write about something less weighty than issues of justice this week – this is, after all, our celebration of the new church year, the day after the annual block party where good times are had by all, the day we choose to bring out the red paraments in honor of our celebration – I tried, but I couldn't focus this week on anything but justice; on such as these, those despised and rejected who count too. My heart dwells on the need to honor 9/11 by lifting up the freedoms that we cherish, and for which so many died. To my understanding these are not freedoms *from* anyone, but rather freedoms *for* everyone.

It breaks my heart to see the anger, hatred, and vilification that is spewed under the guise of religion. Take the pastor in Gainesville, Florida, Terry Jones, who has threatened to burn hundreds of copies of the Qur'an because God hates Muslims; that is unless God instructs him to do otherwise. Here's a news flash, God issued those instructions two thousand years ago in the life and message of Jesus of Nazareth, who has inspired us to live lives not of confrontation but of cooperation and dialog; lives that begin with respect, lives that strive to build bridges not burn them, lives that strive to eradicate fear from our lives rather than instill fear in the lives of others. I am convinced that the only way we can honor those who died on 9/11 is to embrace the freedoms *for* others that represent the highest good we have envisioned in our blessed country. Such as these... there were some ninety nationalities represented among the 9/11 victims, and sixty were Muslims - not counting the nineteen terrorists, mind you, who perpetrated this despicable act - sixty Muslims whom I must honor along with the rest. Such is the freedom to which we are called; for these too are children of God, and God yearns to seek, find, and bring them home as well... God yearns to bring them home to reconciliation, love, and justice.

The tragic events of September 15, 1963 have also been on my heart this week. Being a Southern boy I may be the only one whose heart skips a beat this time of year, but on September 15, 1963 – a Sunday – in Birmingham, Alabama, the KKK bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church. They were oblivious to the fact that four young girls – Denise (11), Addie Mae (14), Carole (14), and Cynthia (14) had arrived early for Sunday School and were in the church

basement when it was bombed. Needless to say, they didn't survive the blast. I am compelled by faith to honor the sacrifice they made, not by lashing out at those who are different from me, but by standing for those who are different for me; for finding ways to recognize that while we have made significant strides in the area of inter-racial relationships, we ain't there yet, brothers and sisters. We got a ways to go before recognizing that we are all lost sheep, every one of us, and that God yearns to bring us home; God yearns to search, find, embrace, and help us find our way home.

It has been said that when Paul McCartney heard the news that these young black girls had been killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, he sat down and penned the lyrics to what would become a signature Beatle's song, *Blackbird*. "Blackbird singing in the dead of night," he wrote, "Take these broken wings and learn to fly. All your life you were only waiting for this moment to arise. Blackbird, fly..." Be the story true or apocryphal it provides a potent image for prayers on behalf of these four young girls. May our voices be added to theirs, singing hope to all while flying free... to these young girls I say, "Blackbird, Fly..."

We are all lost sheep, every one of us, and God yearns to bring us home; God yearns to search, find, embrace, and help us find our way home. But be ready for a surprise; when we arrive, we're going to find that home is not a single family dwelling, we're going to find that home is a community, a true community in which we seek ways to cooperate, respect, and build richer community, sharing peace, grace, and dignity. It's my prayer that God will help us find our way home - each of us, all of us - very, very soon.

ⁱ Today's Invitation to Worship:

How long will we come before the Lord with tired spirits and droning voices?

How long will we sit and sing praise with noiseless songs?

How long will we worship with bored faces and dulled senses and offer tin when we could give gold?

Do we or do we not believe the news is good?

O Lord, you love us!

Why aren't we shouting?

We don't have to earn it!

Why aren't we singing?

Why aren't the feet stomping and the doves flying and the bands marching and the fingers snapping and the hands clapping?

If the news is good... Sing!