

Sermon: Lost and Found

6/13/2021

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It all began with muttering. The Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders of Jesus' day, were muttering about his choice of friends. At the time, the expectation was that a faithful Jew would not share a meal with sinners such as tax collectors. After all, tax collectors were corrupt, dishonest, and greedy. They were seen as having colluded with the Roman Empire in order to live a comfortable lifestyle. They were the so-called "scam artists" of their day, ready to take advantage of those less fortunate, including their fellow Jews, all for the sake of their bottom line. As sinners, tax collectors had become unclean according to Jewish purity laws, laws which, as we heard last week, required that unclean persons separate themselves from society until they had offered the appropriate sacrifices and been ritually purified. For the Pharisees and Sadducees, tax collectors, among other sinners, were the last sort of people with whom Jesus should have been associating, even if they did not believe he was and is the Messiah and Son of God. So the Pharisees and Sadducees began muttering about the differences between us and him, the clean and the unclean, and the respected and the despised. Muttering that led Jesus to tell those gathered two parables, each starring a different person from the bottom of the social ladder.

As far back as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Israelites had been a shepherding people. Sheep were raised for their wool and their meat, as well as to be sacrificed in Jerusalem, with one hundred being a fairly normal size for a small flock. In today's first parable, Jesus tells of a shepherd caring for such a flock who finds that one is missing while doing his nightly count. Immediately, the shepherd leaves the other ninety-nine, most likely in the care of a family member, and begins searching for the one who is lost. Now, if I were the shepherd, I imagine

that I would have had some mixed emotions upon finding the sheep. In addition to being relieved, my guess is that I would have a serious conversation with them, much I did with Thane a few weeks ago when he walked out the front door and down the street in search of Tyler and his Papa. But that's not what we hear happen in our first parable. Rather than express his frustration or seek to assign blame, we are told that the shepherd rejoiced and gathered his friends and neighbors to celebrate. He was that overjoyed to have found what had been lost.

Given the important role that shepherds played in Jewish life and in Old Testament passages like Psalm 23, where David proclaims that "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," the natural assumption might be that shepherds were held in high regard. In fact, they were notoriously despised within Jewish society. Much like tax collectors, shepherds were considered untrustworthy, despicable, and incompetent sinners. The expectation was that anything they said might be a lie, leading to prohibitions against them holding public office or being called upon as witnesses, and that everything they sold might be stolen. Shepherds were among the last people that many Jews, especially Pharisees and Sadducees, would have been expected to learn from, let alone gain strength from in their spiritual lives and ministry. And yet, it was the example of the grateful, determined shepherd that Jesus used to teach those gathered there that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." It was an expected teaching for an unexpected crowd.

As that unexpected crowd listened to Jesus, they likely felt a range of emotions. There were some people who almost certainly felt like the sheep that was lost and needed to be found, others who felt like one of the ninety-nine, left and seemingly taken for granted by the shepherd, and a select few who saw themselves as the shepherd, as the one ordained by God to go and save the lost and the downtrodden. Like us, I'm sure they could have spent hours discussing the

parable, seeking to assign meaning to each element. We did that for a few minutes in bible study a few weeks ago. We could ask questions like: who does the shepherd represent? What is the significance of Jesus using sheep rather than cows? Are we the shepherd's friends and neighbors or are we one of the sheep? These questions are worth asking and reflecting on. And yet, in today's Gospel lesson, we don't hear Jesus seek to answer them, suggesting that we should not be quite so concerned with answering them either. Rather, what we hear is Jesus teaching his followers about the certainty of searching, that the shepherd will always leave the ninety-nine to find the one, and about the celebration that will follow after the shepherd, our Good Shepherd, finds the lost. Searching and celebration, two points Jesus emphasizes yet again in his next parable, the Parable of the Lost Coin.

“One day,” Jesus continues, “there was a woman with ten silver coins who misplaced one.” The coins were most likely *drachmas*, each of which was equivalent to roughly a day's work. For wealthy Jews, one *drachma* may not have been worth searching for. But for this woman, most likely a peasant, the missing coin was a significant loss. Her home, like most first-century Palestinian homes, did not have any windows, so we hear how she began by lighting a lamp and grabbing her broom. Perhaps, she thought that the coin was covered in dust on the dirt floor, so she swept every inch of the house, watching the floor intently. Then, having not yet found the coin, she may have begun searching high and low, looking everywhere that she remembered having touched over the past few days. Finally, we hear how she spots a glint of silver flickering in the light. As she picks up and holds the coin between fingers, she becomes so overjoyed that she rushes out and calls her friends and neighbors. “Rejoice with me,” she tells them, “for the coin I lost has been found!”

Once more, it can be tempting to spend our time seeking to assign meaning to every part of the parable. For example, each time I hear it, I wonder how much the woman spent while rejoicing with her friends. Did she spend the entire coin, and if so, why was she so determined to find it in the first place? Shouldn't she have been more reserved and not thrown a party, or at least not spent a cent more than was necessary? There are so many questions that we could ask. Question in many cases worth asking, but not at the expense of Jesus' central message: that God searches diligently for all of God's children and that God joyfully celebrates whenever someone who is lost has been found. Jesus chose the figures in today's Gospel lesson because they would cause the crowd, especially the Pharisees and Sadducees, to question how dedicated they were to finding the lost, how they were responding as members of the ninety-nine, and whether they were in fact ones who were lost and in need of being found. A message that remains as true for us worshipping here today as it was for those in the crowd back then.

No matter who we are or what we have done, we are all God's children. There are times in each of our lives when we have lost our way and sometimes even run away. It is in these moments that God has gone out in search of us. God has searched low and high for us because God loves us. God longs to be in loving relationship with us and for us to be in loving relationship with God and one another, and whenever that happens God celebrates. But as we know all-too-well, we also have a choice. In order for us to be found, we need admit that we are children of God and seek to live our lives in ways that demonstrates that commitment. We need to be willing to welcome the tax collectors and sinners of our day and to rejoice whenever they or anyone else is found, because everyone is precious to God and thus everyone should be precious to us.

Like the Pharisees and Sadducees of so long ago, we Christians do our fair share of muttering. We mutter about the differences between us and them; between Christians and non-Christians, Methodists and non-Methodists, and the right Methodists and the wrong ones. Except here's the thing about all that muttering: if we read today's parables closely we come to realize that the ones in need of repentance are not the lost sheep or the lost coin. I mean, how can a sheep or a coin repent? No, they are the ones listening, from the people being muttered about to the people doing all that muttering. We have been called to embrace and give thanks for each and every person who God brings into the sheepfold. Praise be to God for always searching for those who are lost, so that we all might be found. Praise be to God for allowing us to take part in God's ministry and share God's love with others. And praise be to God for giving us the strength and humility to stop muttering so much and to rejoice a little bit more whenever someone who is lost is found. And all God's children said, amen.