

## Lost and Found

Christ Church - 28 June 2015

Luke 15: 1-7

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.

8 "Or what woman, if she owns ten silver coins and loses one of them, won't light a lamp and sweep the house, searching her home carefully until she finds it? 9 When she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Celebrate with me because I've found my lost coin.' 10 In the same way, I tell you, joy breaks out in the presence of God's angels over one sinner who changes both heart and life."

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I hate it when I lose something. I go crazy.... tearing things apart, looking everywhere.... I can't rest.

If someone else in my family loses something.... same thing. I'm on it! I drop what I'm doing and join the search, looking everywhere I can imagine.

And most often, I find it.... or we find it... and life can return to our "normal" patterns and peace and pace. Phew!!

So we can connect with this aspect of our scripture. We get it.... but what were our early first century hearers thinking? How did they react? I'm not sure I can fully gauge this. But a couple of thoughts come up.

1) Could a shepherd leave the other 99 sheep alone, vulnerable to prey and dangers to find the one? Sheep are not considered among the brightest animals in the farmyard. All day, they are grazing - head down, following the grass.... the food. Hey, we do that too. I'll go anywhere for a good potluck!! We are cautioned to not be like sheep, following a leader without thinking for ourselves.

We know today that many shepherds have a well-trained sheep dog to help keep the sheep in a defined place. This would make the ability to leave to search for the lost sheep more doable.

2) I imagine it was often the case that shepherds had some help. If they were working with another person, they weren't working alone. One could stay while the other went off to search for the lost sheep.

3) We have heard that at least some of the time, shepherds were young boys given the task of

watching and guarding the sheep. This is a lot of responsibility. These sheep were a major part of a family's livelihood. One sheep lost could make a difference.... but leaving the 99 alone??? I'm really not sure what the message would be for this young boy. I imagine he'd be in big trouble if he was found to be lax in his job and several in the flock were hurt, or taken by wolves, or...

Nonetheless, this scripture speaks to us about the shepherd. We love the image of God as a good shepherd who cares for all.... for the least and the privileged. But we also know that there are many lost sheep today, many who are out there on their own... many who have strayed from the path of God-direction and God-guidance. Does God love these folks any less? Or any more?

I was one who strayed from church for several years as a young adult. I continued on a spiritual quest, but circumstances and values took me away from the church fold... the flock. It could even be said, that I was lost. I had lost my solid grounding.... my tribe. It was when I found Christ Church that I could come back.... that I felt welcome.... that I could hear the message of God's inclusive love in new ways. Thank you!!

Let's look at this story from the perspective of the one who is lost.... or feels lost. Have you been there? What does that feel like. \_\_\_\_\_ (scary, petrified, worried... very frustrated... alone)

Initially, that lone sheep doesn't even realize it's lost. This might even be true for us too. The sheep has just been following the best green grass. And I'm pretty sure a sheep doesn't have the feelings we have. But if a wolf entered the picture, its heart would race. The sheep would run in all directions trying to find safety.

Feeling lost is uncomfortable to say the very least.

Who are the people today that may represent the lost? Who are they? \_\_\_\_\_ People turned away or turned off by a message of a fear and hate and exclusion. People who are drawn in by the pull of power and wealth and away from God's generosity. People who are poor and homeless, who don't feel good enough to step in our doors.... And of course, many of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters have felt lost.... separated from the church. Even if this was a place where they grew up and felt loved as a child, for too many of them, when they came out and got honest about who they are, too many of them felt rejected. Too many of the church's "people" of God (and sometimes it only takes one) said they weren't wanted. They seemed to speak on God's behalf when they said, "You are not acceptable to God." That message is still far too prevalent today!!

Our parable says something very different about the nature of God than these hurtful words. This scripture suggests that God is going to go searching near and far, even for the one lost sheep. And when found, God will throw a party and celebrate big time!! This is the God that guides my faith.

Here at Christ Church we have been officially a reconciling church for 18 years. In 1997 we voted. We actively began this process in 1995, with the urging of Gayle and John and some others. And in the beginning of our exploration process, many said, why do we need to take 2 years to study this. Even then, folks felt this is already who we are. Some had suggested we become reconciling even before 1995.... Being welcoming of all has been part of our make up as a church for many years.... we have been on the forefront in many ways. "All are welcome here, wherever you are on your spiritual journey." and today we add.... life journey.

So, this week's Supreme Court ruling for marriage equality is something that we have stood up for and advocated for... for decades. We have many reasons to celebrate. Maybe now others

will actively join us. Maybe now, as the times they are a changin', others will open the doors of their hearts just a little bit more so that they can be found. When the UM church (do you notice I said when) really fully becomes a place guided by God's radically unconditional love and acceptance, we will be able to more truthfully say as a whole church, we have "open hearts, open minds and open doors."

So, we are in the lost and found business..... We are in the lost and found business. And this is tough, because today too many define what it means to be a Christian with a narrow view. Some focus more on a punishing God who has a restrictive set of rules to follow. Here at Christ Church, we actively live out the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. To be honest, we're not perfect and there's still more to learn to fully do this. But being of service to others is at the center of who we are.

We also make life choices based on John Wesley's three simple rules.... Do Good.... Do no harm.... and stay in love with God. They are often read in this order... though I see that they are clearer when we change it up. As we work to stay in love with God, we are called to do all the Good we possibly can... and be very careful and honestly look at ourselves and our choices and behaviors so that we do not do harm.

We are in the lost and found business.

Some people have become lost and disconnected from church, because they see too much hypocrisy among Christians, and too little of a loving God. I'm not perfect.... we're not perfect. But here at Christ Church, we want people to know they are loved no matter what.... We do this by our daily actions, whether they are single, low income, whatever ethnicity... no matter what their background, their gender or sexuality. It's not our job to judge. Jesus said it's our job to love.... We can't be everything to everybody. Some will decide our message here at Christ Church is not for them, not what they're looking for. But, we can choose to love with abandon.... love wastefully (as John Spong says) as if there is no end to our loving.

There are many things that still need our attention. Another decision this week by the Supreme Court makes health care in the form of ACA, the Affordable Care Act, the health insurance plan of the land. Though many more are now insured, too many still are not. Though some are saving money on this plan, some are not. We need to continue to work for some form of universal health care like some other countries offer.

Our planet is ailing.... and more and more people are recognizing this fact and our human part in this. We have just had solar panels installed here. Soon the sun will be meeting some of our electricity needs here at Christ Church. We do other things too to try to be as "green" and planet loving as we can. We are always discovering more that can be done.

We had very sad news last week with the deaths of the good folks in South Carolina.... and good news this week.... discussions about the "battle cry" of discrimination represented to many by the flag flying over the South Carolina state buildings and thankfully the willingness of some states to bring it down. Now with growing health care insurance acceptance, and the marriage equality issue on the way to being "resolved".... with all of it, the truth is that we have much work to do to truly change hearts and minds so that all will feel God's love. There are still many who have very different views. Many feel very hurt and betrayed. These issues are still not ones I can openly discuss in my own extended family. In the news and on Facebook and other social media, some very divergent perspectives are shared. People died in South Carolina. People die on our streets and in our neighborhoods. More must be done to strengthen community policing, with active dialogue between law enforcement and citizens.

Hate is wildly bred in too many places and hearts around too many challenging issues. We need more love in the world... more understanding.... more peaceful dialogue on many, many issues.

Today we focus in on marriage equality. Have you read the statement from Justice Anthony Kennedy's majority opinion as a result of the 5-4 vote holding that same sex couples have a constitutional right to wed - He has written -

No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.

The judgment of the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit is reversed. It is so ordered.

Opponents of gay marriage argue that this undermines the traditional sanctity of an ancient institution by redefining it. He affirms that the point of same-sex unions is not to weaken marriage, but to expand it in the nation as a whole and ***honor it more fully in people's lives***. Too many cannot yet see this.

I was at our yearly annual conference in Burlingame last week. What a dramatic time with the very sad deaths in South Carolina. We came together in support for our brothers and sisters there. I was very impressed with the progress I see, as we get closer to our General Conference next year in Portland. Our Western Jurisdiction of the UMC is strategizing about how to advocate for becoming a more inclusive church. It was so clear to me that our own Bishop Brown who is now also the lead Bishop of the council of Bishops of for the entire UMC.... he has evolved himself on this issue. He spoke up strongly for advocating for all of our brothers and sisters who struggle for whatever reasons, including our LGBTQ members and family and friends. After the Supreme Ct ruling came down, Bishop Brown wrote a letter, including this statement -

"... if we seek to be an inclusive church that serves all of our parishioners, and all of our neighbors, we will have to consider how we treat all people equally..... May we continue to be a people of prayer, and hope, as we work towards a day of equality and inclusion for all people created in the image of God."

Our planet.... our brothers and sisters... so much is needed from us as we do all that we can to support God's home and family.

We are in the Lost and Found business. Lost sheep, lost coins, lost wallet, lost keys, lost resources, lost people... lost energy. The message is that God's grace abounds. We are ALL of us loved and accepted... no strings attached. We are called to do all what we can to appreciate that love and reflect it out into the world... this is what being disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is all about.

We have so much to be grateful for, so many reasons to celebrate today. And... we must also remember that our work is far from done. Yes, we will kick up our heels and dance a happy

dance. And.... we will sing as we Stay in love with God.... work hard to do no harm... and continue in gratitude to be the love we want to see in the world by doing all the good we can and serving others.

Yes, for today, we celebrate and we continue to join hands for the ongoing work ahead. Blessings my friends, on this wonderful day.