

Lost and Found
Psalm 23; Luke 15: 1-7
Don Lincoln

In 2016, there was a shepherd in Spain fell asleep on the job.¹ Before you could say goodnight, one-thousand-three-hundred sheep were wandering through a nearby town, up and down the streets and alleys as if they owned the place. The town's police force spent hours rounding up the wayward woolies and returned them to their pasture. And what did they find? They found the shepherd – STILL snoozing – he had no clue 1,300 sheep had gone missing.

And what that shepherd didn't know, the rest of the world soon did. The story went viral, showed up on international news – film clips of all these sheep running around in this town - and all over social media the shepherd's friends and even some of MY friends, had an.....um.....field day. I laughed, too when I heard about it. At first. And then I thought: WAIT. I do that all the time. BOTH things.

Like those foolish sheep, I wander astray – far from the guidance that I ought to be paying attention to. AND – like the one overseeing the flock, I too fall asleep at the wheel as a shepherd. I may put up a good front as a shepherd of a flock, but trust me, I miss the mark plenty of times. Because, after all, I'm really mostly a sheep in shepherd's clothing. As most of us who have any responsibility for others are – whether we're pastors or parents, partners or friends, teachers or managers.... ALL of us are really sheep in shepherds' clothing. And because of that, most of us spend a fair amount of our life feeling.....SHEEPISH!!

Which is one reason why this morning is so full of the sheep/shepherd allusions. The lectionary passages we often follow are on a three year rotation, but EVERY year in the lectionary the 3rd week after Easter is "Good Shepherd" Sunday – with Psalm 23 and a Gospel Shepherd text. We're diving into the deep waters of this shepherd theme, because each and every one of us knows – or should know – that we're all sheepy.

A colleague of mine who once worked on a sheep farm writes this about sheep.²

Sheep are filthy, generally covered in mud and their own waste. Their wool tangles around all sorts of nastiness and holds onto it until the shepherd shows up to get it clean. It's a good thing **Woolite** works on wool – whether it's in a sweater or still on the sheep.

Lambs bleat a gentle "bahhh." Full grown sheep can blurt a disturbing "BLAGHGAGHHAGHAFETT!!!!!" My colleague says this has caused him to jump and

even trip and fall down because he was so startled by the volume, suddenness, and the generally demonic nature of the sound.

He goes on. Sheep *start out* cute, cuddly, and calm. They rarely stay that way through adulthood. Sheep are either suicidal or stupid—probably both. A West Texas Shepherd, Ed Winton, describes them this way: "Sheep are just born looking for a way to die." He recalls countless stories of sheep putting themselves in unnecessary peril, much of which could usually be avoided by doing something simple.....like **TURNING AROUND!**

The more I've learned about sheep, the more accurate – AND less flattering – Jesus' metaphor becomes. Think about it. Like dirty sheep, you and I are often tangled in all sorts of undesirable and messy things. Like sheep, we startle others, often sounding worse than we think. We start off cuddly, but rarely remain so throughout our lives. Far too often we involve ourselves self-destructive behavior we cannot escape on our own.

But Scripture reminds us, thankfully, all that clings to us on the outside, does not corrupt what is on the inside. And even dirty sheep, noisy sheep, self-destructive sheep are still valuable to the shepherd. So are you and I to God. We are important, valued by the Shepherd. Which is why this parable about a lost sheep is my favorite.

Why does Jesus tell this parable? Look at the first two verses. "All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'" So he told them the parable.

They're grumbling because Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners. In the ancient near east, table fellowship was serious business. You didn't just host ANYBODY. And a self-respecting Rabbi didn't host just anybody. Jesus obviously didn't read that part of the manual. And the scribes and Pharisees are outraged by who he is hanging with.

You see, they assume they represent all those safe in the flock. And they think they're the whole flock. Nobody's missing. Or if they are missing, it's their own fault. "Why waste your time on those that are no longer or have never been part of the flock? Be with us, Jesus. Be a blessing to us, who are safe in the fold. We're the right sheep; the real sheep – why dirty yourself with the likes of them?"

So, Jesus says, "I want you to imagine you have a hundred sheep..... I want you to imagine you have one hundred sheep and you lose one. Now, wouldn't you, therefore, leave the others in the wilderness, and go out after the lost one until you find it?"

The sensible answer to that question is "NO!!" Of course not!!!

Did you hear what Jesus said – “leave the 99 in the wilderness?” Wolves, coyotes, snakes, holes to fall in, streams to drown in. Nobody who's in the sheep business, who has one hundred sheep and loses one, leaves the ninety-nine to the wolves and the coyotes, and chases off after one. You cut your losses, forget about the lost sheep, and go on with the ninety-nine. Who among you would leave them and go after the one? Nobody.³ We'd cut our losses; thank God we've got the rest of the flock.

The fact of the matter is, for those of us who, like the Pharisees, consider ourselves already in the fold – (RIGHT? – we're in the fold?) – we'd find much greater comfort if the shepherd DOESN'T leave the 99 and search for the ONE. We don't want to be left defenseless. In our age of "bottom lines," we'd think a 1% write-off is a pretty good day, and if we're still in the fold, that means there's NO risk to us, the 99!

And that bottom-line mentality makes a lot of sense – until you're that one lost sheep. Think about it. What if the one that gets lost next time is you or me and God decides to stay with the 98 now. If the one is me, then I want God to mount the biggest heavenly search and rescue team possible. Spare no expense. Come, find me!!!!

And God doesn't.....spare any expense. God searches – comes in human form, and seeks out the lost. Every last one. At the cost of His own blood.

You know the interesting thing in this story is Jesus says, "I say to you that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

Show of hands – put your hand up, anyone in here who is one of the 99 who doesn't need repentance. Lemme see the hands. C'mon; put 'em up!

I remember a pastor asking that question once, “Are there any of the 99 righteous in here who don't need repentance?” And the pastor was surprised when one lady in the back actually raised her hand, stood up and said, “I'm raising my hand on behalf of my husband's first wife!”

Have any of you ever **MET** any of those ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance? That's the funny thing in this story. There aren't any! And I'm guessing the scribes and the Pharisees never got it. Every single one of us is the one.⁴

God has a particular interest in those who are lost. And thanks be to God for that. Thanks be to God, he doesn't follow the Little Bo Peep approach to lost sheep, “Leave them alone, and they'll come home, wagging their tails behind them.”

The good news is, God doesn't leave us alone in our lostness. Doesn't wait for us to repent. For He's like the hound of heaven, running over hill and dale trying to find every single last lost sheep. After all, it's our SINS that commend us to God, not our

goodness!! Get rid of the idea that you and I must find ourselves first, and repent, for the Shepherd to welcome us back. This shepherd doesn't cut his losses. God is out there every day looking for the one. This shepherd goes – and searches over hill and dale for us. And spares no expense. Thanks be to God, that is good news, for each and every one of us lost sheep.

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN.

1. Vicki Kemper, Still-Speaking Devotional, September 22, 2016.
2. Mike Baughman, Edgy Exegesis, May 4, 2014.
3. Robert Farrar Capon, "Kingdom, Grace and Judgement – the Parables of Jesus."
4. *ibid.*