

Lost and Found
Luke 15: 1-7
Don Lincoln

Back in the Fall I said I wanted to revisit some favorite Scripture texts during this last year of full-time ministry. I'm realizing the weeks are quickly dwindling away, so here's one of my all-time favorites – and surely also one of my favorite “Ah-ha” moments with Scripture – a revelation that came to me well into my ministry that turned upside-down the way I had previously – and always – thought about and preached on this text.

It's the one of the two stories at the beginning of the 15th chapter of Luke. It's the story of the one and the ninety-nine – the story of the lost sheep.

Listen to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15, verses 1-7.

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: '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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And 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." Just 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.'

Last week I said I liked Mark's version of Jesus' baptism better than Matthew's or Luke's. But looking in my files, I've preached more sermons from Luke than any other Gospel. It's clearly my favorite Gospel to preach and probably to read. Luke writes for a Gentile audience. That's me. He isn't worried about all the Old Testament connections like Matthew is. Luke is the only one who tells two of the best known and most loved stories – the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son parables. Frankly, the language of John's gospel can be so ethereal, and rather than a chronological-historical record of Jesus' short stories, there are a lot of really lengthy discourses.

I also like Luke's wider lens of inclusivity. Along with that Good Samaritan story, Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells the story of the ten lepers healed by Jesus, and highlights that the one who comes back to express gratitude to Jesus – is a Samaritan. Two stories – where the hero of the story is an outsider – someone who is looked upon with disfavor by those who considered themselves God's chosen. Outsiders – heroes.

Another difference in Luke's Gospel is its sense of joy. Luke begins with joy – the full account of Jesus' birth – "I bring you good tidings of great joy."

And Luke ends with joy – Jesus ascends and "the disciples returned to Jerusalem with great joy." This sheep and shepherd story speaks of "more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents." Luke is overflowing with joy as he unfolds the good news of a Gospel wide enough for the whole world!

I've told several stories preaching this text. One of my favorites is about a shepherd in Spain who fell asleep on the job, and 1,300 sheep ended up wandering the streets of a nearby village. It took police hours to round them up and back at the pasture they found the shepherd still in dreamland. He had NO CLUE they were gone.¹ Not that any of us have ever missed the mark on our shepherding duties – right?

I've also learned a lot about sheep over the years of preaching this text. A colleague who worked on a sheep farm wrote this:²

Sheep are filthy, generally covered in mud and their own waste. Their wool tangles around all sorts of nastiness and holds on to it until the shepherd shows up to get it clean. It's a good thing **Woolite** works on wool – whether in a sweater or still on the sheep. And while sheep start out cute, cuddly, and calm, they rarely stay that way through adulthood. His example was (some of you may recall this), Lambs bleat a gentle "bahhh." Full grown sheep will suddenly blurt out a startling and disturbing "BLAGHGAAGHAFFTT!!!"

A West Texas Shepherd, Ed Winton, described them this way: "Sheep are stupid – **at best**. He recalled countless stories of sheep putting themselves in unnecessary peril, much of which could usually be avoided by simply.....**TURNING AROUND!**"

In response to those reflections I remember telling some stupid people stories – like people hiking in some remote area prone to sudden, drastic changes in weather, wearing nothing other than shorts and a t-shirt. Then the proverbial blizzard arrives; helicopters fly in dangerous weather, hundreds of people risk their lives to find the fools who just had to climb that mountain that day.

"You stupid sheep!" Like sheep, you and I start off mostly cuddly and cute, but rarely remain so throughout our lives. Like sheep, you and I are often tangled in all sorts of undesirable and messy things. Like sheep, we often startle others, sounding far worse than we actually think we do. Far too often we involve ourselves in self-destructive behavior we cannot escape on our own. The more I've learned about sheep over the years, the more accurate Jesus' metaphor for US becomes.

But clearly, even dirty sheep, noisy sheep, self-destructive sheep are still valuable to the shepherd. And Scripture reminds us, thankfully, so are you and I to God. We are not only valued but loved by the Good Shepherd. Which is why this parable about **one lost sheep** is an all-time favorite.

The first two verses of the text explain why Jesus tells this parable. “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 Jesus told them this 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 host just ANYBODY. And a self-respecting rabbi surely vetted his guests. Jesus obviously didn’t read that part of the rabbi manual. The scribes and Pharisees are outraged by those with whom Jesus is hanging out.

Do you get their assumptions? They assume **THEY** – scribes and Pharisees - represent the ones who belong in the flock. In fact, 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 a blessing to us, Jesus, the ones who are safe in the fold. We’re the real sheep; the right sheep;– why dirty yourself with the likes of them?”

I read this story and I wish there was a video of Jesus’ face when he starts to respond to them. “I want you to imagine you have one hundred sheep and you lose one. Now, wouldn’t you 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, cliffs to walk off of. Nobody in the sheep business, who has one hundred sheep and loses one, leaves the ninety-nine to their stupidity and the dangers of the wilderness world and chases after one.

You cut your losses, forget about the lost sheep, and go on with the ninety-nine. Who among us would leave them and go after the one? Nobody.³ We’d cut our losses; and thank God we’ve got the rest of the flock. Heck, our church budget is built on a margin of 3% less anticipated income than what people pledge. We get it. Who doesn’t understand a 1% write-off?

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 don’t want the shepherd leaving us to search for the ONE. We don’t want to be left defenseless. We think a 1% write-off is a pretty darn 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** are that one lost sheep. Think about it. What if the one that gets lost **next time** is YOU – or ME – and God decides to stick with 98 now. I don’t know about you but if that one is me, I want God to mount the biggest most expensive, extravagant, heavenly search and rescue campaign imaginable. Spare no expense, Lord. Come, find me!!!!

And God doesn't...spare any expense. God searches – comes in the flesh, and seeks out the lost; every last one; at the cost of His own life.

You know the fascinating thing in this story is when Jesus says, "I say to you there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." This is that **AHA-moment** I spoke about at the beginning that came to me, thanks to Episcopal priest and author Robert Farrar Capon in his amazing book about the parables of Jesus.

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!

Let me ask it this way. Have any of you ever **MET** any of those ninety-nine righteous persons who have no need of repentance?

I remember one time I asked that question and a pastor friend of mine said "I won't ask that in my congregation because there's somebody in the back of the room who will stand up and say 'I'd like to stand up on behalf of my husband's first wife.'"

That's really the outrageous suggestion in this parable of Jesus. The righteous? There aren't any! Every single one of us is the one – the one sheep.⁴ Including the scribes and the Pharisees listening to Jesus that day – and I'm guessing even then they didn't get the point.

God has a particular and never-ending eternal interest in those who are lost. And thanks be to God for that. Thanks be to God, God 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 you or me to repent to come after us. As one theologian put it God is the hound of heaven – and in this case that hound is a sheepdog – running over hill and dale to every nook and cranny of the universe throughout human history trying to find and save every single last lost sheep.

I love that recognition that came to me some years ago in this text, **The Good Shepherd – our Good Shepherd – doesn't cut His losses.** God is out there every day looking for the one – **EVERY one!** And spares no expense in the search. As we see in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on our behalf. Thanks be to God, that is good news I will never tire of preaching, and never tire of hearing, again and again and again – Good News, for each and every one of us lost sheep.

May you and I know it to be so, today and always, 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.