

“Lost and Found”

Exodus 32:7-14, 1 Timothy 1:12-15, Luke 15:1-10

Collegiate Presbyterian Church

September 12, 2010

Exodus 32:7-14

⁷The LORD said to Moses, “Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; ⁸they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ ⁹The LORD said to Moses, “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. ¹⁰Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation.”

1 Timothy 1:12-17

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Luke 15:1-10

¹⁵Now 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 neighbors, 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 persons who need no repentance. ⁸“Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’ ¹⁰Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Sermon

Well, it’s almost like an alarm clock went off
this week here at church,
waking us up from our long summer nap.

You see, this is the week each year
when all the planning and waiting comes to an end
and things really get cracking.

A few examples from last week:
The Wednesday Afternoon Fellowship
tied their high attendance record with 47 folks
who came out to hear Jim and Jean Thomas
share

Club CPC and our youth groups fired up this past Wednesday,
and with all the kids and adults
there were probably 130 folks here.

New spiritual formation classes begin this morning
along with a great new members class.

There's a golf outing this afternoon
(which you can still play in if you would like).

The choir is back rehearsing...
our praise band is back at full strength...
boards and committees and task forces are meeting...
and before you know it,
Walk Though Bethlehem will be here.

Just for fun, let me test my hunch that most of us here this morning
have been here at church least once during the past week.

Show of hands, please,
if you've been here at least one other time this week.

Now, from your staff's point of view
this is all very satisfying...
to look around and see everybody here...
to have meetings double and sometimes triple-booked...
to see so many people doing so many things,
it's all very encouraging
to see the church doing what the church is supposed to do...
to see this flock gathered and active and healthy.

Then these lectionary readings appear
and all of a sudden it feels like
someone is throwing cold water on our celebration.

Because what they're celebrating is not what we're celebrating –
the flock all grazing together, .
the flock walking beside still waters,
our souls being renewed
in worship and Sunday school and coffee hour.

In fact, today's scriptures
don't celebrate us doing the "church thing" at all.¹

¹ This opening is inspired by an essay, "Seeking the Lost Sheep," by Martha P. Sterne in *Christian Century*, Aug. 26=September 2, 1998, p.781

Take the reading from Exodus.
God's flock is gathered at the foot of Mt Sinai.
Moses is up there on top with God
 hammering out the last details of the Ten Commandments.
But that takes awhile and to the flock down below
 it seems like it's taking way too long.
So they start to get restless and squirrely
 and things are about to unravel
 when Aaron comes up with the golden calf idea...
which the flock goes absolutely ga ga over...
 and which proves that
 just being in a group of people worshipping God
 doesn't mean you won't eventually end up
 dancing around something silly.

Don't get me wrong!
It's good that we are here this morning...
 to worship...
 to grow and learn...
 to fellowship together...

 This is good!

And not only because your staff gets terribly lonely without you,
 It's good because it's just better to be gathered than off alone...
There is spiritual growth that can only happen in a community.
 Just ask anyone who has been blessed
 in a small group Bible study...
the insight, the support, the accountability is just invaluable.
Or when we're faced with a big decision...
 and want to do God's will
there is no substitute for the discernment of others.
And surely it is better to be gathered together
 when we're scared or sad or confused.

It is better to be gathered than alone,
 I believe this with all my heart!
But here's the thing.
If it is truly Jesus we have come here to meet up with,
 then we need to know he wants us
 to meet up with him "out there" as well.
If it is truly Jesus that we have followed in here today,
 then we need to be prepared to follow him out.²
And, if we are to take these parables in Luke 15 to heart,
 then we need to ask him to give us his heart
 for the all those individual sheep and coins

² Sterne, again.

he is searching for.

When we enter Luke's Gospel this morning,
Jesus has been talking a lot about hospitality and discipleship.
But even more, he has been walking his talk...
showing what it actually looks like
to extend his hand
to those normally excluded by the community.
And what's happening in this morning's passage
is that those on the outside
are edging closer and closer to listen to him
while those on the inside are grumbling louder and louder.
It is this grumbling that sets the stage for Jesus' stories.

It was about midday up in the Judean hill country.
A thin, sun-baked shepherd
has been grazing his sheep since before first light
and will continue to graze them until dusk.
His work is demanding.
Finding grass in a country
that only gets 12-14 inches of rain a year is no small thing.
Neither is keeping the sheep together,
since sheep are not the sharpest tool in the drawer
and have been known to eat their way lost.
And he must protect them from predators
which were always trying to pick off
the young and the weak and the lost.

When he led them out this morning they were all there -100 of them.
He has watched them closely all morning
and is sure they are STILL all there,
but it's midday and time to count.
Ninety nine.
There must be some mistake so he counts again... 99.
And that's when all his good sense abandons him.

Because that's when he leaves the 99 in the wilderness
and takes off in search of the ONE.
Up to the hills, down in the valleys...
along the ridges and into the crevices he goes searching.
He calls for it... sings to it... whistles for it...
one hour... two hours... three hours.
Until finally, he hears its pitiful bleating and finds it...
huddled beneath a bush,
its legs frozen in place.
He gathers the animal in his arms

(you know just how dirty and smelly sheep can get, right?)
he gathers it in his arms, sets it over his shoulders
and presumably stopping along the way to gather the other 99,
he carries it home
where he proceeds to throw the celebration of the year.
The flock is together again...
the lost one has been restored...
it's time to PARTY!

There was once a woman who had ten silver coins;
each one worth about a day's pay.
She kept the coins tucked away in a jar
in case she ever needed them.
But one day while cleaning her house
she saw the jar and decided to count them.
Nine. One was missing.
Must be some mistake so she counts again. Nine.
So she lights every lamp in the house,
grabs her broom and starts looking.
Under the carpet and behind chairs,
in dusty corners and outside windows,
inside coat pockets, kitchen jars and trash cans...
she searches and searches and searches some more
until she finds it.
And when she does
she filled her house with food and drink,
with friends and neighbors,
all to celebrate her coin that was lost and now is found.

And Jesus... assuming that his listeners would do the same...
asks them:
"Which one of you having a hundred sheep...?"
"Or what woman having ten silver coins...?"

I don't know about you,
but Jesus shouldn't assume that about me.
I don't think I would leave 99 sheep in the wilderness
and go in search for one.
No, I think I'd be grateful it was only one...
and having learned a hard lesson,
I'd be even more vigilant guarding the 99 I still had.
I'm just cautious that way...
I'm realistic that way.
And I certainly wouldn't search for a lost coin,
and when I found it throw a party
that costs way more than the coin was worth!

Just ask Kris, I'm WAY too tight for that sort of foolishness.

The good news in this passage is there is one who is not so tight...
there is one who IS this foolish.

The good news is that Jesus is NOT LIKE ME,
but cares passionately about those who are away from him...
and will do whatever it takes
to find the one,
to restore the one,
and then to throw a big old party.³

Jesus came to seek and save the lost –
And if we are to follow him “out there”
as we have followed him “in here,”
if we are to have his heart for seeking and saving the lost,
then I think we have some work to do, my friends,
as people and as a church.

It is a good kind of work, but work nevertheless.

I want to suggest two things
you and I can do in order to more faithfully follow Jesus.
The first is to slow down enough
to truly notice the people we meet every day.
One of the inescapable implications of Jesus' stories
is that God is passionately concerned for each individual person,
that God's love is not an abstract, generalized love for all humankind;
rather it is focused on each and every person AND,
it is focused enough... foolish enough...
to leave all of us long enough
to go off in search of the one who is lost.
If we are to become shepherds like THAT,
we must slow down and notice.

Some of you may know
there is a word of greeting used in India and Nepal.
The word is: “namaste.”
It's kind of a mystical word
that doesn't really have an equivalent in English,
but it means something like:

“I honor the Holy One who lives in you.”
Or, “that which is of God in me honors that which is of God in you.”⁴ The breakneck pace at
which so many of us live
often keeps us from honoring God in us,

³ Art Ross in an essay on this passage in *Interpretation*, October 2007, p.422-424

⁴ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: living as an ordinary radical*, Zondervan/2006, p.80 and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Namaste>

much less honoring God in others.
We must slow down and notice.

The second thing follows upon the first.
Though Jesus is looking for lost sheep and coins
wherever they may be,
it is clear when we study his life
that the places he was most prone to search
were the places the good religious folk didn't dare go...
and that the folks he was most prone to search out
were the ones that others had given up on...
or just didn't want to bother with...
or just took up too much time and energy and love.
Yet, Jesus came all this way looking for THEM...
and when after being "in here" we follow him "out there,"
so will we.

The Friday morning men's small group
has been reading a book Jesse recommended to us.
This book describes one person's journey
to take seriously what Jesus says...
and to try to live out what it means to follow him.
Well, if it's true that
"God comforts the disturbed and disturbs the comfortable,"
then I can honestly say that our men's group,
all of which are relatively comfortable
are now in the process of being disturbed!
For example, as we talked on Friday
about the kind of people Jesus spent most of his time with...
some of us confessed that we really don't know anyone who is poor;
not personally.
We all know "the poor" exist...
that their numbers are increasing in this economy...
and inspired by Jesus' love, we try to do good things to help.
Our support of MICA being but one example.
Yet, what we realized is that some of us
don't personally know anyone who actually uses
MICA or Good Neighbor or the Free Medical Clinic...
We don't know anyone
who has lived a couple of weeks at the shelter...
We don't know anyone who has to decide between
paying for medicine and food and school supplies for the kids.
We have some work to do, sisters and brothers,
or should I say God has some work to do among us
if we are to follow this shepherd and this woman
out into our world.

The truth is that we've got this "church thing" down.
Just take out your bulletin and look at the calendar on the back
and you will know beyond a shadow of a doubt
that we've got this church thing down.
But you know what's not there? What's not on that calendar?
There's not one "welcome home" party scheduled this week.
Not a single one!
Which means that we may do lots of things well, my friends,
but we need to learn how to party like Jesus did!
We need to learn how to put on parties
where sheep and coins and men, women and children
will say with the Apostle Paul:
"the grace of our Lord overflowed for me
with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus."
We need to learn how to party like Jesus...
And the only way to do that is to leave here and go out there.