

Sunday, July 3, 2022

A Restorative Community

(Series: "Stories of Jesus" – The Lost Sheep)

(Message Three)

(Luke 15:1-7)

Scripture

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

³Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."

Message

While serving a church in Sunnyside, WA, one of our cadets on a church campout got lost at White Pass in the Cascade Mountains.

Most of the cadets had left camp to go for a mid-afternoon hike; this young cadet decided to stay back at camp. After the group left, he changed his mind. He didn't tell anyone he was leaving, and he figured if he took a "short cut" he could still catch the group. He wandered off the trail. The others came back without him. At dinner, he was declared missing. Then it started raining. Frost was predicted overnight.

The call went out for "search and rescue." And they came – professionals from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, even Wyoming and Colorado. They dropped everything and came at personal expense; arriving within hours, and systematically went to work. By daybreak they had spread out and they never stopped searching until they found him late that next afternoon – walking on an old logging road - miles from the camp. Scared, but alive. We took him home. And we celebrated the next day in worship!

Jesus does the same for us. In Luke 15, Jesus tells three stories. Each story talks about something *lost* and something *found*: a lost sheep, a lost

coin, and two lost sons. All three parables are intimately linked together and give each other additional meaning.

At the end of each story, Jesus says there is a party, a celebration, a banquet. The shepherd throws a party for a lost-now-found sheep; a woman throws a party because of a lost-now-found coin; a father throws a party in honor of his lost-now-found son.

The point is clear. Jesus rejoices when the lost are found.

THE SET UP (Luke 15:1-3)

Luke opens this chapter saying **tax collectors** and **sinners** (lit. *people of the land*) had gathered around to listen to Jesus; they are likely having a meal together.

The Pharisees and teachers of the law (*haberim*), committed to strictly following the law, are complaining to and about Jesus who was welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners – that is, people of the land (that is, people who are not like us).

There was a rabbinic rule that said, “*Let not a man associate with the wicked, not even to bring him nigh to the law.*” The Pharisees tried to follow the letter of that law.

Meals were often challenging; but the Pharisees tried to keep the law in a precise manner while still living among the “*lost people of the land* (Israel).” They had to be strict about **what** they ate and with **whom**. What they ate and with whom became the very issues that distinguished them, and they rejoiced in their identity and their successes.

It became increasingly imperative to avoid any contact with *people of the land*, even being in the same general location became a serious matter. “Sinners” – those who didn’t **follow** the law **strictly** - were one thing. “Tax collectors” were quite another thing; they were seen as **collaborating** with the **enemy**.

French collaborators with the Nazis were killed and imprisoned after the war. Russian collaborators in Ukraine are being rounded up and imprisoned by the Ukrainian government. So, the Pharisees’ objections to Jesus’ table fellowship were both religious and political. They took it very seriously.

For Jesus, the matter of table fellowship was equally serious. Table fellowship provided a meaningful **picture** of God’s redeeming love - a picture Jesus invited us to portray and participate in over and over again until he returns.

The very acts the Pharisees blamed Jesus for were the very acts for which Jesus came into the world. The Pharisees considered them shameful; Christ

considered them an honor.

So the issue *on the table* here ☺ comes down to one's identity – which underscores the deep passions involved.

Jesus addresses his identity and his mission with this set of stories: *"You accuse me of eating with sinners and tax collectors. I do! I not only let them in, but I also actually and intentionally go out and look for them and urge them to come in and eat with me."*

Jesus begins with a story where the *associates* of a shepherd come together to rejoice with the shepherd (as opposed to the Pharisees who simply complained) when he finds a lost sheep and brings it home from the wilderness.

Like all the stories Jesus tells, this is a finely crafted story by an expert storyteller. The rhetorical structure of the passage is clear and strong.

There are three themes in the opening lines (15:4): (1) you; (2) one; and (3) ninety-nine. These same three themes are repeated at the end (15:7) **forming bookends**.

In between these "bookends," there are **seven** stanzas (the perfect number) with four different themes. The themes of (A) lost; (B) found; and (C) rejoice are presented and then repeated backwards – as (C) rejoice; (B) found; and (A) lost.

The fourth stanza, the center theme (D) (15:6) - **restore**, is the **central** message of the story.

Jesus addresses the Pharisees and teachers of the law as if they were shepherds. Shepherds, in oral law, were a proscribed trade, i.e., an occupation the Rabbis said no law-abiding Jew should teach his son because they thought it was impossible to keep the law and practice such a trade.

Ironically, the *shepherd* is a symbol for God in the Old Testament (**Psalms 23**) and for the leaders of Israel. (**Ezekiel 34**) Those leaders (including King David) were remembered as shepherds and honored.

But times had changed; herdsmen had intentionally driven their sheep onto other's land and were not to be trusted. The Pharisees wouldn't have taken kindly to being associated with shepherds.

Jesus is likely taking issue with the clean/unclean labels applied to professions and to people. He is also pointing out the common use of language designed to avoid accepting blame. That is, notice no one says, *"I lost my sheep."* They say, *"The sheep went from me..."* No one says, *"I didn't miss my train, the train left without me."* *"I didn't break the dish; the dish fell from my hand."* We do the same thing. It is never our fault.

THE STORY

Theme A – **Lost.**

The sheep is lost. Who is to blame for the missing sheep? Luke opens his version (Matthew's is slightly different in **18:10f**) with the storyteller blaming the **shepherd** for losing the sheep (*"Suppose one of you...loses one of them"; 15:4*) (It is a "Little Bo Bop" story.) Note that the "lost" was part of the shepherd's flock.

Note also in Luke **15:6**, that the shepherd does not admit any blame at his party (*"I have found the sheep that was lost"; 15:6*). The storyteller is affirming each is to blame.

Jesus – looking at the Pharisees and teachers of the law - is saying, *"You're the shepherds, leaders, of Israel and you have lost sheep..."* by the way you have led or failed to lead my people.

If losing a sheep is an "unavoidable accident," then the shepherd was not held responsible. E.g., if a sheep was attacked by a wolf or dog, the shepherd should be able to manage. Any loss would be his fault. But an assault by a bear, lion, leopard, etc., would be an *"unavoidable accident."*

If he led his flock to a habitat of wild animals, if he led it along a cliff and a sheep fell; if a sheep died from cruel treatment, it would be his fault. But if a sheep dies a natural death, it would not be his fault.

All too often leaders forget the reason they lead; they lose "sheep" along the way (even intentionally); and they offer excuses why they are not responsible for the loss.

Jesus holds them accountable: *"You require someone, me, to pay the price to go after them and bring them back while you have the audacity to complain about me making amends for your mistake and welcoming them back into the family! It is outrageous!"*

While the shepherd is blamed here, the **sheep is not** assumed to be **innocent**; it is the nature of sheep to wander off or lag behind. Jesus' listeners know this. Unlike cats and dogs, sheep, as they nibble from one grass tuft to another, are completely oblivious to their surroundings. If the flock is not led by an alert shepherd, sheep will get lost on a **regular** basis.

So when a sheep is lost, the shepherd is at fault, but the sheep is not innocent. Without this understanding, the lost sheep is not a symbol for repentance. The *lost sheep* theme, a reference to God's straying, sinful, unrepentant people, is a major Old Testament theme referenced in **Psalms 23, Jeremiah 23, and Ezekiel 34.**

Theme B – Found. *“And when he finds it...”*

In Luke, the bad shepherd quickly becomes the Good Shepherd who is willing to pay the high price of finding the sheep and carrying it home over rugged hills.

Using the same character for bad and then good is not uncommon in rabbinic storytelling – we’ll see it again in the story of the Lost Sons. The bad shepherd/good shepherd has Old Testament precedence: **Jeremiah 23:1-8** and **Ezekiel 34:1-24**.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel, along with the classic **23rd Psalm**, all picture a Good Shepherd going after the lost sheep. Jesus echoes this in **John 10**.

While a flock of a hundred would have an assistant or two, not every shepherd would choose to search for a missing sheep. The risk was often higher than the reward. And there are still ninety-nine, so what is the problem?

But the shepherd in this story now takes responsibility and **leaves** the other ninety-nine sheep in the **wilderness** to **restore** the one that is **lost**. He sees it as his calling, his mission!

No shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep alone in *open country*, in the wilderness, without some form of provision and protection. He could have put an assistant in charge temporarily so he could look for the lost sheep; he could have put his sheep under another shepherd’s care; he could have placed his sheep in a secure fold or cave. Jesus omits these all details – apparently deliberately.

The focus now moves from the ninety-nine to the restoration of the one that is lost.

The open pasture lands of Palestine are rugged. Each rock could hide a sheep quivering behind it. A lost sheep is **terrified**. It sits down, usually in a sheltered place, and starts shaking and bleating. It no longer responds to the shepherd’s call. When found, the sheep is in such a state of nervous collapse that it cannot stand, it cannot walk, it cannot be led.

In order to be saved, the sheep must be **carried**. A sheep can weigh up to seventy pounds, often as much as a young shepherd.

So **why** does the shepherd go after the sheep?

Christian tradition answers, *“Because he **loves** it.”* That is true. The Old Testament tells us God acts in history to save because of his love for his people. He saves for *their* sake. (cf. **Hosea 11:1-4**, **Jeremiah 8:18-22**)

But Ezekiel and Isaiah tell us of shepherd herds (primarily) for his own benefit, not the sheep’s.

“Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O House of Israel, that I am

about to act, but for the sake of my holy name..." (Ezekiel 36:22-23)

That is, the Good Shepherd is acting for his **holiness**, honor and **glory**.

The Good Shepherd says, "*I never lose a sheep. My Father never lost a sheep! Let it never be said that I lost a sheep. A Good Shepherd goes after a lost sheep until he finds it. I will find all my sheep!*" A God who is loving and faithful is a great God.

Theme C – Rejoice. "*He joyfully puts it on his shoulders.*"

In rugged country, it is a mark of courage, strength, character and **Christlikeness** that the shepherd *rejoices* when he finds the lamb knowing the **price** he will have to pay. It is the sacrificial (**atonement**) action of the shepherd **alone** that saves and restores the life of the sheep. There is always a price to be paid for salvation and restoration. The shepherd must carry the lost sheep on his shoulders.

The shepherd pays a considerable price to carry the sheep back home. If he doesn't, however, the sheep will die. The shepherd celebrates the joy of grace. Jesus is the Good Shepherd and "*The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.*" (John 10:11)

Theme D – Restore. "*...and goes home.*"

In the process of telling the story of a lost sheep found and restored by a costly sacrifice of the shepherd, Jesus significantly redefines repentance.

The New Testament Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*; it reflects the Old Testament Hebrew *shub*. *Shub* means "to return" – with an emphasis on returning to the land, returning to Jerusalem (Zion), and returning to the Temple. In **Isaiah 40-55**, it includes a return to God. Jesus de-Zionizes the idea of repentance.

The Jews, as Christians do, often talked about repentance as the three-fold process of 1) admitting/**confessing** the sin, 2) providing **compensation**/reparations, and 3) **resolving** not to sin again. But Jesus now changes the focus of repentance from the sheep to the shepherd, from the sinner to the Savior.

For Jesus, repentance means *the acceptance of being found* (granted the "saved" illustrated here is an animal). The *found* is in no condition to do anything but "**be saved.**" (That is, he has nothing to contribute.)

Repentance according to this parable is not based on some meritorious work the believer completes; repentance is here likened to a sheep who can do nothing but get lost. The sheep in no way earns or deserves his rescue. It is purely a gift of grace.

A Good Shepherd must come along and carry the sheep home or it dies.

Sheep need a Good Shepherd! Jesus is the Good Shepherd. We need Jesus. The costly, sacrificial action of the shepherd defines and dominates repentance.

Theme C – Rejoice. Now that the sheep is safely home, *“he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, rejoice with me...”*

Restoration brings joy. If the shepherd’s motive for saving the lost sheep was simply **love**, he would spend the evening **petting**, feeding, and grooming his lost sheep like a someone who has just found a much-loved dog (or cat?) who was lost.

But the shepherd persevered and sacrificed for the **honor** and character of his **name**; honor and character are always community related. Since the community did not witness his saving effort, they must know the kind of shepherd he is, hear the shepherd’s story, and celebrate with him at the finding of the lost!

Jesus says, *“This story is about how I (Jesus) find and save my sheep! Rejoice with me for I have found my sheep. I am the Good Shepherd.”* The call for a celebration (party) indicates his joy at the preservation of his honor.

Middle Eastern custom requires that guests be served some food and/or drink. The rabbis said, *“There is no joyous celebrating without eating and drinking.”*

While only the “lost sons” parable specifically mentions a banquet, the storyteller wants us to assume there is eating and drinking at this party. The return of a *lost sheep* (e.g., a tax collector) back home is an occasion for **joy** – not only for the *shepherd*, but for the entire **community**.

With the phrase, *“friends and neighbors,”* Jesus intentionally includes the Pharisees in this community, suggesting they too should be rejoicing (instead of constantly complaining).

Theme B – Found. *“There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents (i.e., who is found)”*

Jesus was continually under attack for welcoming and eating with tax collectors and sinners – with those some defined as undesirables (i.e., the lost).

Rather than defend his actions, Jesus boldly affirms that he not only welcomes sinners, but he also **actively searches** the **wilderness** to find them and bring them home at great cost. Jesus leaves no doubt he is talking about himself, his sacrifice, and his Kingdom.

“I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep...says the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed.” (Ezekiel 34:15-16)

The Pharisees would’ve made the connection between Jesus’ words and Ezekiel’s. They would understand Jesus was grouping them with the bad

shepherds. They would have understood Jesus was claiming to be the one **fulfilling** Ezekiel's **prophecy** by seeking the lost sheep of the community. They would have caught Jesus' indictment: if heaven can rejoice over a repentant sinner, why can't you, Pharisees and teachers of the law?

Theme A – Lost. “...over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

Don't miss the fact that ninety-nine still **remain** in the **wilderness**, in open country; they are not safely in the fold; only the one who was “lost” and the **shepherd** “**found**” is actually home. “*There are none righteous*” (**Romans 3:10**), only those who think they are; sadly, the *righteous* don't think they're lost; the *righteous* don't cry out for a shepherd.

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have [all] turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (**Isaiah 53:6**)

Jesus includes the Pharisees and the teachers of the law in the ninety-nine.

There is little rejoicing in the village over the **ninety-nine**; they are not yet home. Both the *righteous* (sheep) and the *sinners* (lost sheep) need to be **brought** home by Jesus to the Father. Only then will heaven rejoice.

In this deceptively simply parable Jesus proclaims himself as the presence of God among his people. In this parable, Jesus reminds us that we are at home with him only because he came searching for us and found us through his amazing sacrifice. In this parable, Jesus reminds us we are part of his **search and rescue** team seeking to save the lost sheep of his **community** and his **world**. The Kingdom of God is a restorative community.

Prayer:

Father, we all like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and you laid on Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the iniquity of us all. Thank you for sending Jesus on a search and rescue mission for us; thank you that we have been found through no effort of our own, and are being carried home by our faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

Father, open our eyes to the plight of other sheep hiding behind the rocks and crevices of life. Equip us for search and rescue and send us to find and minister to those who are lost. Use us in the building of your Kingdom.

In the name of Jesus our Teacher and Rabbi, Amen.