

Disciples Seek People for Christ and Church

Part 2 of Sermon Series:

What Disciples Do

a sermon based on

Luke 15:1-10

and delivered on

September 15, 2019

14th Sunday after Pentecost (Year C)

at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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What did the ninety-nine sheep say, when the shepherd left them to look for the one that was lost? ... That's ba-a-a-a-h-d. I've told this joke several times, especially in relation to this passage. But is it an accurate reflection of what Jesus meant? It seems to be.

The passage begins telling us about the Pharisees and the scribes – the good church folks – who were complaining that Jesus wasn't just spending "too much" time with sinners and tax collectors, but that he was spending any time at all with them. In effect, they said, "That's ba-a-a-a-h-d." Right?

Look, right here you've got people who are striving to be good – striving to be godly. Why waste time on those others? I don't think that question even has to be a dismissive one. Maybe it could be, "Why not spend your time more efficiently on the folks who are already on the right track? Why not spend your time helping them to be better?"

Maybe that's how they meant it. Maybe that's how Jesus heard it, when he launched into these two parables. Or maybe – just maybe – Jesus wanted them to really reconsider what they were saying and how they lived out their righteousness. Was it a waste of time for Jesus to spend time with those tax collectors and other sinners and outcasts? We can think of examples: Levi and Zacchaeus, two tax collectors who end up following Jesus – one even becoming an apostle. The Samaritan woman collecting water at the well called others to listen to Jesus. Even that murderer hanging on a cross next to him was told that he would enter paradise – not because of Jesus' preaching but by his way of being. Then there were the thousands of others: the 5000 normal folks gathered to hear him preach so that they could be better and who were fed on the five barley loaves and two fish offered (Mt 14:16-26, Mk 6:39-49, Lk 9:9-19, Jn 6:5-15) (one of the only – if not the only – miracle that is reported in all four Gospels), the four thousand who were fed on seven loaves and some bread – four thousand people on the outskirts of his community (Mt 15:31-16:2, Mk 8:1-11), and so many others.

Jesus was making the point that was not – it is not – a waste of time or even a foolish use of his ministry to be with "those" folks. So Jesus turns it around. This story of the lost sheep isn't one of the fool who has a dollar fall into the outhouse as he's standing up, and then pondering what to do takes a one hundred dollar bill out of his pocket and throws it in afterwards. When his friend says, "What are you doing?" he replies, "You don't think I'm going down there for just one dollar?" In the parable, the shepherd doesn't risk the lives of the ninety-nine to find the one who is lost. He doesn't take them back into danger, but trusts that together they will be safe – while that lost sheep is all alone and could be lost for good unless he goes to find it. Even the fool recognized the value of that one dollar he'd lost.

Jesus knew that the folks listening to him would understand the value of that one sheep. I have to ask you, isn't there just a bit of a sense that if he's willing to go all out for "that" sheep, that I can count on him too?

Remember Jesus didn't just tell the story of that lost sheep. Without giving the people a chance to talk about that, he launches into another parable, of a woman who'd lost one – just one coin. He goes on to describe her search. In doing so, he points out her desperation. This coin was one of ten. Think about that – it was a tenth of her life savings. She couldn't just let that go to total waste. That coin was irreplaceable. Yes, she could have worked to earn another coin; but then she would still miss out on the value of the first. A sheep could be replaced, but at what cost?

Have you ever lost something – or misplaced something – that is irreplaceable? It doesn't even have to be something of great monetary value, does it? You search for it. You keep hunting until there it is in the last place you look. (Because then you've found it and can stop.) But you keep going. Even things that aren't necessarily that precious. Back in June, I lost my pocket knife. I've yet to find it. Reluctantly, I bought a new pocket knife. But I keep looking. It's just a knife! It is replaceable. I replaced it. How will I feel when I find it?

So this woman who finds an irreplaceable coin – think of her joy. Think of the joy of that shepherd who returns with one hundred sheep rather than ninety-nine. What do they do? They call together their friends to rejoice. They can't contain their joy!

That's the joy that heaven experiences when one sinner repents. But why? Sometimes it's troubling. Is God really that much more pleased with a sinner who repents than those of us who strive to be good? Should we as Paul asks, "(C)ontinue in sin in order that grace may abound?" (Ro 6:1) Does that really make sense? It does if we think that God's joy is only connected to the thought of a great fiat – a great change – the best show.

But let's go back to that shepherd and that woman. What were they feeling while the sheep was lost and while the coin was lost? They were desperate – frantic almost to the point of despair. Their joy is unleashed by this great sense of relief and the validation that their search was indeed worthwhile. That's where heaven's joy comes from as it watches Jesus' ministry unfold knowing that it goes through the unspeakable torture of the cross, that it's worth it for that one soul who would be lost. That's how much God treasures you. That's how much God treasures each one of us here. That's how much God treasures every single person whose ever lived.

For those who've gone astray whether a little ways or those who've been consumed with unspeakable evil – God is desperate for them to know his joy – his deep love for them. And if God's joy is so great for the lost, doesn't that reveal how much he loves each of us?

So what do we do with this? The sermon title is "Disciples Seek People for Christ and Church." Let me be clear, the order is important: disciples seek people for **CHRIST** and then Church. Not the other way around.

As mainline Protestants sometimes we're sometimes uncomfortable with evangelism. We think of push Christians trying to win people into their fold to grow their church. I'm suspicious of that sometimes, too. But the word evangelism – literally means "spreading good news." Spreading joy?

So our first step is to engage in lifestyle evangelism. Living as if we're actually happy about Jesus and the place he has made for us in the Church so that we can rely on one another (like the ninety-nine sheep). To live lives together that seems appealing to the ones who are wandering alone.

Second, we can engage in relational evangelism. I've talked about this before. Going out to where people are and meeting them. Intentionally meeting and engaging with people who are not like me. Doing it NOT so that we can point out their sinfulness and need for forgiveness, but to look for and to point out where they are precious – because that's the part of them that led God to send his Son. John 3:16 doesn't say "God was so fed up with people"; it says "For God so loved the world, that he sent his Son."

Third, we can engage in invitational evangelism. Notice this is third – after we've strived to live lives worthy of the grace we've received and built relationships. We invite people to witness the joy of those who know that God loves them. We invite people to church to see how we care for one another. I've heard that between eighty and ninety percent of people who join a church do so because someone invited them.

Of course that behooves us to worship with joy. It behooves us to really care for one another. It behooves us to examine our own consciences so that we can claim the forgiveness he offers.

Disciples seek people for Christ. We don't have to save them. We can't. But we can help to find them by lives that help others to accept that they are too precious to miss out on God's love. AMEN