

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

As I spent time with the parables of the lost this week, I found myself worried about how much we trivialize what Jesus is saying. It's not malicious or even necessarily intentional, but we tend to think about the small things that we lose...the sock in the dryer, the quarter in the couch (does anybody keep quarters in their pockets anymore?), the TV remote.

We look at these little things that happen in our day to day life, and we make the comparison to the woman who lost one tenth of her savings. We look at the dumb things we do, and we compare ourselves to the sheep that wanders off from the safety of the shepherd. But there's a bigger point to find in what Jesus says to the grumbling crowd. There's something more important to these stories that lead into the most famous "lost" parable – the parable of the lost son and the grace-filled father.

Maybe today, especially today, we have to dig a little bit deeper into what is happening in these stories to recognize just how incredibly grace-filled they are.

The setting matters – that's why Luke includes it. "Those people" are getting close to Jesus. The sinners are showing up and Jesus is welcoming them and even <gasp> eating with them! Remember that story that came just a few weeks ago about who we're supposed to invite to the table? Remember that Jesus hinted – or outright stated – that at the table, gathered around the nourishing table, is where we encounter God's kingdom? So, Jesus answers the grumbling with a series of stories, building an argument for the absurdity of God's grace and the radicalness of the kingdom.

"Which one of you?" he asks them.

If you have 100 sheep in the **wilderness** – a place that isn't particularly safe – it makes perfect sense to leave 99 of them in danger to find the one who wandered off, right? Of course not! No self-respecting shepherd is going to risk his entire flock – perhaps the only tangible resource he has – to do something so foolish. Jesus asks the question as if the answer is so obvious, and to his listeners, it might have been. From their perspective. And it wasn't the answer he was looking for.

The right answer would be to calculate the cost and risk, deciding that the one errant sheep can be sacrificed to whatever might happen alone in the wild, rather than risk everything. Surely no individual sheep is worth that! Everybody knows that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few...or the one. That's the **right** answer – in the world's economy. That's the right answer to those who want to hold onto power and the status

quo. That's **not** the right answer in God's kingdom.

In God's kingdom – in the place where God's love and grace hold the center, the answer is that no sheep can be lost. No sheep is beyond the loving shepherd. No sheep is left to fend for themselves in the wilderness. The 99 don't outweigh the one so the shepherd finds the lost sheep. And celebrates.

It's not just a congratulatory pat on the back with a "good job, me." It's not even just a story told around the fire with the other shepherds. It's a formal party, with the friends and neighbors "called together" so that everyone can be part of the story of recovery. Everyone rejoices that the lost sheep was found.

But even then, I'm not sure we really get it. I don't know about you, but I'm so far removed from sheep farming, that I'm not sure it strikes the same chord with me that it does with the first hearers of this story. By comparison, the resources we have available to us are so far out of scale to a 1st century Roman province, that stories set in that time have a really tough translation hill to climb. Never mind the language differences, the vast difference **in reality** means we have to work extra hard to understand what Jesus is telling us about God.

"Which one of you?" he asked them. As if it is obvious they would do the same thing. We know it wasn't actually that obvious. The relentless pursuit of the lost is much more the character of God than it is of us. We're quick to give up. We're easily distractable. We're much closer to the sheep that's lost than we are to the shepherd – but that's the point.

This is how Jesus redefines the relationship by which these Pharisees and scribes are living with their God. The story makes it about the God who goes after the lost at all costs, without fail, without hesitation. This story, these stories, separate God from the transactional nature of the world.

There's this meme video out there on social media, I'm sure at least some of you have seen it, and it's so appropriate when we hear this story. The video shows a sheep stuck in some kind of drainage ditch – it looks like it's about a foot wide and several feet deep. It makes you wonder how the sheep ever got in there. There's a boy who is carefully pulling the sheep's back legs until he can get enough leverage to pull the whole sheep out of the ditch, which he finally does. The sheep is so excited to be free that it takes a couple of bounding steps and launches itself...right back into the ditch.

We might want to connect ourselves to the relentless shepherd or the persistent

woman searching for her coin, but we're really just a bunch of lost sheep that God has to find over and over again.

And that's the grace of this story. That's the grace that holds onto us while we're wandering the wilderness or stuck in a ditch. To me that feels like a pretty important way of looking at life in the world today.

I was struck by a phrase in our creation reading today, from Bishop Steven Charleston. He's a retired Episcopal Bishop and a citizen of the Choctaw Nation. We heard from him, "Nothing is finally lost...Life is still growing beneath the concrete. The sound of the earth is breathing beneath the glass and steel."

I liked it so much I bought his book, *Ladder to the Light*, and I'm reading it now. He wrote elsewhere in his book,

"we take the survivalist option to find a private hideout and stay there. In our cynicism, we think every [one] is for [them]self. We decide to grow used to living in darkness, accepting our reality as a fearful place we cannot change."

It's in our nature at times to jump back into the ditch because then we don't have to face what's going on around us. I'm feeling that pull pretty strongly these days.

But, I'm holding onto that note of grace in the midst of the darkness...the promise that "nothing is finally lost." God will relentlessly pursue and find us no matter how much we mess things up. That image of life growing beneath what we've built, the earth breathing beneath the hard structures we put on it...that's the truth of the shepherd who finds us. That's the truth of a grace-filled God who continues to claim us.

I don't know when the darkness ends. I don't know what the party looks like when all that's lost is found. But I trust that God will pull us out of the ditch and find us in the wilderness every time we wander off. And today that is the good news. And today, that is enough. Amen.