

Weekend of Sunday, September 15, 2019
14th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 24/Proper 19/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 15:1-10
Sermon Title: “A Holy Hope”

Theme

Jesus tells two stories that suggest a curious connection between the lost being found and sinners repenting. God takes the initiative to find sinners, each of whom is so precious to God that his or her recovery brings joy in heaven.

Text

¹Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to [Jesus.] 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

"We are the ninety-nine%" image

You may recall that back in 2011 there was a movement of angry Americans that became known as "Occupy Wall Street" and the movement had a slogan that was "We are the 99%." The phrase refers to the income and wealth inequality in the United States and according to the movement, the top 1% wealthiest people in society have a disproportionate share of capital, political influence, and the means of production. I understand the anger and frustration represented by "Occupy Wall Street" movement. It seems unfair that ninety-nine% of the population of the United States has less power and influence than this 1% of wealthy folks. I get that.

That movement and phrase came to my mind when I re-read this famous parable of Jesus often called "the one and ninety-nine." But that parable is almost the opposite scenario of the "Occupy Wall Street" movement.

As you know, the scenario is a shepherd and his flock of sheep. Sheep are notoriously dumb animals and that is in part because they are eating machines. They will keep their heads down, mowing off grass to eat forever, continually moving forward losing sight of the rest of the flock, which they may be wandering away from.

Well, in this parable, that is exactly what happened. The shepherd was responsible for one-hundred sheep and one had wandered off. When the shepherd noticed, he left the ninety-nine and went looking for the one. **(Picture of Jesus with a lamb on his shoulders)** And then as has been portrayed in many pieces of art, the good shepherd, often portrayed as Jesus even though he was never a shepherd, finds the lost sheep, often a lamb, and brings it back to the flock and then rejoices with his friends and neighbors. Jesus further explained the parable by saying,

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.

If I went around the room and asked you how you felt about that parable I'm willing to bet most of you would get moony-eyed and say something like, "Oh that is our

lovely savior Jesus. Isn't he wonderful?" But you ought not to feel that way, and I will tell you why:

- You *are* the ninety-nine that was left behind so that the shepherd could go after the one stupid sheep who got itself lost!
- You are the ninety-nine that didn't get lost;
- You are the ninety-nine that stayed together as a flock;
- You are the ninety-nine that did not cause Jesus, the Good Shepherd, to go off searching. I am one of the ninety-nine too!

Now how does *that* make you feel?!?

I'll tell you how Jesus thinks we ought to feel. We, the ninety-nine, are supposed to be the faithful ones, the ones who know that, come what may, everything is going to be alright.

This last few weeks I did pastoral care with the Tom and Darryl Passewitz. Tom had been fighting cancer for years and in the last couple of weeks he was told that the medical community had done all they could do. It was time for him to go home and enter hospice care. I asked him how he felt about that.

One might think he might of felt abandoned by the medical community, maybe even abandoned by God. When I asked Tom how he felt about that he said, "I did all I could do. I know they, (the medical community) did too. This is not what I want, but I'm okay with it. I'm ready. I'm putting my faith in Jesus Christ for whatever is next."

That is exactly what Jesus expects of us, the ninety-nine.

I was in a situation at the little church up north where, after going to an evangelism and hospitality conference, it was suggested that we put "Visitor Parking" signs at some of the best, closest parking spots. Of course there were other best, closest parking spots that were reserved for handicapped parking. A member of the church came to me in protest and said, "How about we save some of those best, closest parking spots for the "paying members.""

That is exactly *not* what Jesus expects of us.

The context for the Gospel reading is that Jesus was talking with "tax collectors and sinners" and observing this conversation were some Pharisees and scribes, those who considered themselves the do-gooders and holy people beloved of God.

In those days, the Romans, the occupying adversary of the Jews, recruited tax collectors from the indigenous people because, who knew better what could be gotten out of a person than one of them. And being a tax collector was a lucrative job, because it was literally a license to steal. The Romans would set a price for each head, but then the tax collector was free to get as much as he could as long as the Romans got their head-tax. So the way tax collectors were looked at by the Jews was someone who conspired with the enemy, and who literally had a license to steal from them.

Luke also mentions that Jesus was hanging out with "sinners." He doesn't clarify who or what those sinners were guilty of, but they had most certainly broken one or more of God's commandments, decrees and ordinances.

For the Pharisees and scribes there was a finite list of commandments, decrees and ordinances, and they knew for certain that they themselves had not broken any. They were "justified" in their own minds. And they also knew for certain that those they identified as "tax collectors and sinners" were not justified. And to associate with them was to defile themselves, and so they separated themselves. It was as if they were pointing out to Jesus that they didn't belong here with him or them and they certainly did not belong together.

It was to them, the Pharisees and scribes, that Jesus addressed this parable. In Jesus' parable, they were the ninety-nine!

And more than that, Jesus concluded the parable by saying,

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.

Earlier I told you that you are the ninety-nine. Maybe you are. If you are a regular attender here, that is probably you. But if you stumbled in here today because you need a little religion; or you feel terrible about something you did and you just can't

get past it, and you need to hear those words of grace, and taste the bread of remembrance and the cup of forgiveness then you have come to the right place.

You are the one. You are the one who wandered off, focused on the thing that got you lost. You don't need me to make you feel worse about yourself and what you've done. Hang in there, I'll come back to you.

Jesus spent a lot of his time trying to straighten out the misconceptions about his Heavenly Father that persisted among all Jews. His Father was never about the commandments, decrees and ordinances. They were given to give order to the lives of his people, so that they would be seen as a holy people, and a light to the rest of the world, drawing all people to God. And the sacrificial system was a way to ritualize and visualize the grace of God.

But what happens even today in our society is that we separate ourselves into *us and them*. Us, we who get it, the grace of God, that is, and sit in here week after week and sing our hymns and confess our sins – and we are sincere. For the most part, we don't cause God much grief. We know we are sinners in need of God's grace and we know we can find it here week after week.

But can we be like the Pharisees and scribes who look at the people who are not in here week after week and pass judgment on them. And I count myself in that criticism.

To us, the ninety-nine, Jesus says,

"there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

And how should we respond to this? I am so glad you asked.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

I think Jesus would say, "You who already put your faith in me will be rewarded for your faith. But join me and my Father and all of heaven's angels in celebrating the one; the one who was lost and is found."

But maybe, you identify with the one; the one who was and maybe still feels lost. God in Christ has been looking for you, and the rest of us are so happy that you have found your way here. Because this is the place where all of us, me included, come each week to confess that, as hard as we have tried to live God-honoring lives, we have messed up again – am I right?

At the beginning of the sermon I told you that this reading reminded me of the "Occupy Wall Street" movement and their slogan, "We are the ninety-nine!" Well, maybe it's just the numbers that maybe me recall that moment in history, because we, represented by the ninety-nine sheep who did not get lost are to welcome back the one who did.

And if you identify with the one who was lost, I want to tell you, you are not really all that special. Perhaps the only difference between the one and the ninety-nine is that the ninety-nine are more in touch with an addiction to sin and readily acknowledge our need for a savior. And this is the place we come, myself included, to hear those words of grace and taste the bread of remembrance and the cup of forgiveness.

At the beginning of each service I tell all who are here that "You belong here." And I mean it. No matter whether you identify with the tax collectors and sinners or the Pharisees and scribes, all are created by the same loving Creator, and have received grace through his son and our Lord Jesus Christ. We are not all that different. "We belong together."

Prayer

Merciful Lord, in Christ we see the lengths and depths to which you go to save all of your beloved creation. Make us glad and thankful in our salvation so that our lives represent the goodness of our lives justified only by our Lord Jesus, and so that we might share that Good News with all we meet. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen