

Sept. 15, 2019

Luke 15: 1-10

Prayer: Dear Lord, We are grateful for your presence in our midst. May our words and worship be pleasing to you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Lost and Found

A few people in this congregation used to live in the old Tent City under the Pete Hollis Corridor Bridge. It was an encampment that existed for roughly 10 years after the bridge was built in 2004.

We would take visitors from our partner churches to see it because we wanted to show them that people were homeless in Greenville. Many of them had never considered such a thing.

I remember one woman putting her hands over her face and saying, "How did I not know this?"

The camp was within easy walking distance of Triune, and most of the people came here for meals and worship. So quite often, they'd talk to our visitors, show them around, play guitar for them.

And after we left, someone would usually ask if I went down their regularly. I'd say, "No, not outside our Back Yard Mission Days. Everyone knows where Triune is and how to reach us."

And that was true. I usually added that I saw Triune's mission to be an oasis of calm in a violent, drug-riddled neighborhood. When someone was tired of the chaos, they knew where to find us.

To this day, that makes sense to me. That makes sense to the linear thinker in me.

But then I come to today's Scripture passage. We were taught in seminary not to argue with Scripture. If there's something you just can't preach, our professor said, don't preach it. That's better than getting up in the pulpit and arguing with it.

I have found that to be good advice.

I am not tempted to argue with today's Scripture. In fact, I love it. I agree with it. After all, it's my buddy, Luke, talking.

But it hit me when I read this passage that my philosophy of Triune as an oasis doesn't really square with Luke's account of Jesus' words here. So I'd like for us to wrestle with it a little bit today.

Please turn in your Bibles to **Luke 15: 1-7.**

Now 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.'

³ So 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 people who need no repentance.

We'll stop here for a moment. Jesus presents this shepherd as behaving rather oddly. Speaking to the Pharisees, he asks, "**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?”

You gotta think the Pharisees are saying, “No, that’s crazy. We wouldn’t do that.”

Because the shepherd leaves 99 sheep **“in the wilderness”** – and whatever danger might befall them – to seek out one. That is not logical thinking.

The great Southern preacher Fred Craddock said, “Either the shepherd is foolish or the shepherd loves the lost sheep and will risk everything, including his own life, until he finds it.”

Either the shepherd is foolish ... or he loves the lost sheep so much he will risk everything to find it.

This shepherd is no Pharisee, is he? He risks losing the 99 in the wilderness, but he finds that lost sheep. And the finding is cause for great rejoicing. Jesus compares it to the rejoicing in heaven, when one sinner comes to repentance.

On the bulletin board in our reception area, we have a list of people who have been put out of Triune. For some, it’s 30 days, for some 60 days, three months, six months, a year, and indefinitely.

We hate to put people out. When we do it, you can bet there's been a lot of discussion at our staff meetings. But we have decided that certain behaviors – stealing, hitting, cursing staff members, pulling a weapon, death threats – cannot be tolerated.

Instead of the category for indefinite suspension, we used to say someone was out “for life.” Many years ago our associate director Pat Parker said she wanted us to address the six to eight people who were out “for life.” This was the same meeting, by the way, that we learned that a man who was out for life had stabbed a doorman outside a downtown restaurant.

Pat didn't think he needed to be let back in – if he ever gets out of prison. She just wanted us to change the wording so we wouldn't say someone was out “for life.”

She said, “I'd hate to think Jesus would say I was out ‘for life.’”

She was absolutely right. For if we saw a turnaround in those people – sobriety, repentance -- what rejoicing there would be!

But that's our dilemma. How to keep the majority safe while seeking the lost? How to keep the wolf away from those 99 while we seek the one?

For while it makes perfect sense to us to say, “We're right here and everyone

knows it. Let them come when they're ready," that's not really the gospel message, is it?

The gospel message is, "Our God will come after you like a speeding bullet. Like a freight train. Like Hurricane Dorian."

Here's the second part of Luke's story, picking up with verse 8:

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.'

Again, we have this extraordinary rejoicing over something that doesn't seem quite special enough to warrant it. A found coin? Really? Is that worth a party? Aren't we more interested in large numbers of coins, large numbers of people?

But again we hear, "I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

I once read a column by an Episcopal priest, the Rev. Martha Sterne. She opened my eyes to some of the meaning of this passage.

She concedes that we have indeed followed Jesus into this oasis of a church, into this beloved sanctuary where we hear often that people feel the presence of God, have even seen those angels. And we need not apologize for coming together here.

It is a good and powerful thing, this place where we all worship together, rich and poor, housed and homeless, black and white, lost and found.

But that's only half of it. *That's only half of it.* Here's how Rev. Sterne put it:

“We followed Jesus in here, we have gathered together to be renewed, so that every week we can follow Jesus *out of here* -- out to the school and the hospital and the bank and the office and the neighborhoods.

“We gather together here to follow Jesus, then we split up and follow Jesus out of here to seek the lost, the broken, the bleating, the alone.

“Jesus seems to care inordinately about the ones who aren't here. This interest in the absent may seem unreasonable to those of us who show up and keep the institutional church humming, but it is the gospel.”

That's the part that hit home for me. It's not enough to have this fine humming institution if we're not actively seeking the lost. I may not particularly like this extra part of the job, but I'm not going to argue against it. For it is the gospel.

And I am pleased, that without any urging from me, some of our staff go into the homeless encampments and jails every week, offering help, offering hope, seeking the lost.

But the lost, incidentally, aren't just those in the woods or in jail or on our misbehavers' list. The lost are all those who have rejected the word, all those so hurt and broken by the church they don't want anything to do with us. They may be rich and powerful. They may be old and lonely. They may be young and scared.

The only common denominator is that they are not among us 99. For whatever reason, despite our open invitations, they have not come into the flock.

Since March, we have been holding an LGBTQ+ support group on the first Sunday of each month. It is intended to provide a safe space to talk and share among gay and transgender and questioning people.

We have never had more than 13 participants, and in some meetings, as few as seven. So I was thinking, *Maybe this wasn't as great a need as I thought it was.*

Much like we do during worship, we pass around cards and write down prayer requests. Then we shuffle and exchange them, so we have someone else's request to pray over all month. The one I got in September was this: *Please pray for the people too frightened to come into this meeting.*

Please pray for the people too frightened to come into this meeting.

So maybe it's not about numbers. Maybe it's simply offering the meeting for the 13 or the 7 – or the one – who needs it. Maybe it's keeping it open until the one too frightened to attend comes in.

Here's Rev. Sterne again: "Jesus came to save the lost -- lost sheep, lost coins, lost brothers, lost prostitutes, lost loan sharks, lost jackasses, lost weaklings. Jesus came all this way looking for them.

"And those we have given up on or forgotten about or dismissed because of their unworthiness are the very ones that Jesus has headed out to look for. He looks back over his shoulder to see if we are following him."

He looks back over his shoulder to see if we in the 99 are following him.

Six years ago, our Presbyterian USA friends dropped the hymn “In Christ Alone” from their hymnal. Now as Andy and David and Russell, all choir directors, will tell you, hymns are the water-carriers of our theology. The words matter. And here’s what “In Christ Alone” said:

*On that cross, as Jesus died,
the wrath of God was satisfied.*

That is a commonly held theory of atonement – that God was *so mad* at mankind that someone had to die. His “wrath” had to be “satisfied.” And the person of the Trinity that was Jesus agreed to do it.

But that’s not the only theory of atonement. Another theory – the one I hold with – is that the cross represents an act of highest love on the part of God the Father, Jesus the Son.

This is not some New Age theology. It was debated extensively in the 11th century with Anselm holding to the idea of a wrath that had to be satisfied, and Peter Abelard holding to the idea that the atonement was an act of love.

Well, the Presbyterians asked the songwriters of this hymn if they could change the lyrics from “the wrath of God was satisfied” to “the love of God was magnified.” They thought that better reflected their theology.

The songwriters said no. So the Presbyterians dropped the song from the hymnal.

I mention this because it is all of a piece. If you hold that Jesus did what he did out of an outlandish, over-the-top, unreasonable love for us, then the cross and seeking one lost sheep are two sides of the same coin. Both are extraordinary acts of a love so overwhelming, so outrageous, so amazingly grace-filled, that we can but follow in silent awe.

So if Jesus is looking over his shoulder today, I hope he sees us in the 99, following closely, stepping on his heels, crashing into him, as we join him in seeking the lost.

That's where I'd like to challenge us this week. I am confident we are doing good work inside this church. We *are* welcoming people others have given up on. And that's a fine thing.

But are each of us taking that impact into our spheres of influence on Monday morning? Are there lost and hurting people at our Tuesday luncheons and our Wednesday landscaping jobs and our Thursday office meetings and our Friday concert cleanups and Saturday football games? Are we always on the lookout for the left out, the marginalized, the despairing, the lost?

Luke tells us that Jesus is. He's always roaming, always looking, always searching for the lost.

So isn't that where we want to be as well?

Amen.