

June 12, 2022

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 18:10-14

“Is the shepherd reckless?”

1. Today we begin a new sermon series on some lesser-known parables of Jesus
 - a. You may not have noticed, but we just finished four years using what is called the Narrative Lectionary on Sundays
 - i. A lectionary is a list of passages assigned to specific days, Sundays in particular
 - ii. Several denominations choose to use the Revised Common Lectionary (which has a three-year cycle), and we’ve Presbyterians have used it here also along with Methodists, Episcopalians, Catholics
 - iii. So, on a given Sunday, all these churches consider similar passages
 - iv. Four years ago we opted for the Narrative lectionary because it used passages which were not in the Revised Common Lectionary, to have us engage with other parts of the Bible and to expand our knowledge in our faith journey
 - v. We’re in an interlude now before we start on a new lectionary (a three-year cycle) coming up in November. More information on that later.
 - b. The parables in this summer series are ones we don’t usually read or haven’t in a while
 - i. The Lost Sheep, The Ten Talents, The Great Banquet, The Friend at Midnight, The Rich Fool
 - ii. We will pause this series in July while I’m busy with General Assembly work, and Pastor Tonja Gerardy and another pastor will preach three weeks on the Ten Commandments (which only show up once in the Revised Common Lectionary)
2. Which brings us to the parable of the lost sheep. What is a shepherd to do?
 - a. This story of the lost sheep happens elsewhere in the gospels, paired with the parable of the lost coin.
 - b. Here in Matthew it stands by itself – and with a slightly different context, which gives it a bit of a different angle
 - c. It is important to think first about why the image of shepherds and sheep is so important in the Bible
 - d. The Biblical Israelites had a long history of living away from cities, dedicated to tending animals and other such rural activities.
 - e. There are stories of some of the heroes of the faith tending animals in the fields (Abraham and his children, Moses, David, just to name a few)
 - f. The image of shepherd was one that connected with their faith, and they saw God as being God by being the Good Shepherd who takes care of the sheep, the people
 - g. That’s why the 23rd Psalm was written, because of that connection
 - h. Jesus eventually also uses the image of the shepherd (saying in the Gospel of John that he himself is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep)
 - i. But by the time of Jesus, there had been a shift in the national consciousness
 - j. The Israelites were increasingly city dwellers (though of course not only city dwellers)
 - k. But certainly the political and religious leaders and powerful families definitely were now centered in cities, which then began to lower the importance of the notion of shepherding as part of their identity

- l. In fact, it began to be seen as less and less important, or it began to be looked down upon, even seen with contempt
 - m. So think about that and consider that the good news of the birth of Jesus is announced publicly to... that's right: Shepherds in the fields
 - n. A comedian once compared Biblical shepherds to a modern day profession which is not highly valued: they were like today's parking lot attendants, he said. Not a shameful profession, but one which people underestimate and look down upon.
3. This parable of the Lost Sheep comes when Jesus had just been talking with the disciples about status
- a. The disciples had a fascination with status, and they asked Jesus a weird question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"
 - b. To upend their perspective of the Realm of Heaven, Jesus brings a child and says: whoever is as humble as this child will be the greatest in Realm of Heaven.
 - c. And then he tells them this parable starting with a line that loops back to the conversation of the children saying "do not despise these little ones"
 - d. Now here "these little ones" is meant not just as the children but as those believers with less status, those who may be overlooked, even vulnerable, and which Jesus warns, should not be looked down upon.
 - e. So this parable in this context then is about how to understand the community of people being shepherded by God, and to dislodge some of their obsession with status
 - f. Jesus tells his small-city dwelling disciples a story about sheep.
 - i. What do you think? A shepherd has 100 sheep and one gets away. What to do?
 - ii. Picture that for a moment. Some of them caught fish for a living. Did they put down their nets to try to bring in a fish who jumped out of their nets? Unlikely
 - iii. But shepherding is a different thing altogether, Jesus implies.
 - iv. To a city dweller, it may make no sense to leave 99 perfectly obedient sheep ALONE while trying to track down that one wandering sheep.
 - v. But the way Jesus presents the story, it's rhetorical when he asks: "What do you think...? Doesn't the shepherd go after the one?"
 - vi. Indeed he does! That one is important to the shepherd.
 - vii. But isn't losing 1% of the flock just the cost of doing business? Aren't there predators out there who one way or another get a sheep here and there?
 - viii. That shepherd knows the sheep. I'm not saying they named them and such, but would have known them, would have counted them all daily, would have stayed up at night ensuring predators stayed at bay
 - ix. Losing one would be painful, so recovering that lost one would be JOYOUS!
 - g. So, Jesus then circles back: to those of you who are worried about status in the Realm of Heaven or here in the community of God followers, get this right: God's will is for all to be part of the fold, and for you not to look down upon some whom you think less important, or worse, whom you may consider expendable.
4. Doing the work of Jesus in ushering in the Realm of God means we have to be attentive to the 1 and to the 99
- a. You hear me talk often about people in the margins, which is an image that tells a story

- b. If the circle of community has the many in the center as those who get the attention and who hold the power, then the ones away from the center do not get the attention and hold little to no power.
 - c. Think of it in economic terms. There may be some who hold sway with their wealth and political power, while the ones at the margins are basically just worried to make ends meet.
 - d. As the parable implies, there is a power bias to focus on status and try to remain solidly in the center (the 99) while it would seem to make rational sense to let those at the margins (the 1) face risks alone, as the 99 look down upon them and perhaps even blame them for their current difficulties.
 - e. We can pretend detachment; we can callously say that those living in poverty endure the sour fruits of their bad choices or some sort of heinous stereotype. But the more we learn about systemic poverty, the more we can't make those statements.
 - f. The shepherd didn't blame the sheep who was lost; the shepherd just knew it was crucial to bring the sheep back to the fold.
 - g. And you know that shepherd brought the 99 as close on that hillside as he could to then search for the one!
 - h. Our efforts as a congregation to focus on social justice, and to seek to eradicate systemic poverty, have to bring us back to this parable.
 - i. It may be more comfortable not to wonder where the one lost sheep is, but it's less comfortable or not so easy if we know that one who has wandered off, or who finds himself or herself in peril away from the flock.
 - j. This is where the disciples were getting stuck. They were more interested in status than they were in the integrity and wellbeing of the WHOLE flock.
 - k. Jesus tries to transform their perspective and to help them see the flock fully, not just to feel like they can cut their losses if only a few get sacrificed here and there.
 - l. In English we say: I miss her
 - m. Jesus was constantly at the margins of the society of the day, eating with, staying with, in community with the people who lived in the edges,
 - i. who were vulnerable because their health or profession made them unclean,
 - ii. or who were at risk because they were easy prey for someone to take advantage of them.
 - n. Our advocacy for one another does not hinge on whether we find ourselves barely making ends meet, or we find ourselves comfortable.
 - i. Our advocacy for each other is about being a part of the community
 - ii. The 99 seeks the wellbeing of the 1 because we are part of a larger whole
 - iii. And the shepherd guides the sheep with care not knowing who among them will be vulnerable for one reason or another.
 - iv. The shepherd absolutely cares for the 99, but the shepherd is overjoyed when the 1 returns to the fold, because the whole community is restored.
5. Beloved, our call in this parable is the call Jesus gave the disciples. Care for each other, know each other, notice when one, any one, lags behind or gets detached from the group, and act together to ensure that one is restored.

Reflection questions:

1. Share a story when you have felt on the margins or you felt lost.
2. Is the shepherd being reckless when going after the one lost sheep (Matthew 18:10-14) while leaving 99 behind? Is that a good thing or not? Why?
3. In some Christian circles, "people who are lost" usually refers to people who have wandered away from God. But if we think of the lost sheep as someone who has been pushed/alienated from the larger flock, what examples fit that description in our community today? What do we do about it if we're still within the flock?