

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time - September 17, 2023

1 Samuel 30:1–8, 17–19; Psalm 13; Hebrews 2:10–13; Matthew 18:10–14

“God always seeks us out”

1. During my spiritual retreat on the island of Iona Scotland this Sabbatical summer, I found myself with a free afternoon on a gorgeous cool sunny afternoon. So I set out to go for a walk alone.
 - a. Iona is a small island almost as far west in Scotland as you can go, 1.5 miles wide and 3 miles long.
 - i. It is a pilgrimage site because of the abbey founded there in the year 563 by St. Colomba, the nunnery founded in 1203, and because it is a beautiful and secluded island which had been a holy place even before the arrival of Christians.
 - ii. It is home to fewer than 200 people, but they get over 100,000 visitors a year.
 - b. Walking past a few homes at the edge of the town itself, I opened a gate to enter into a large green meadow.
 - i. It was clear that I was in someone’s private property, but as seems to be the culture of the place (and of the UK), well-meaning tourists may wander in so long as they are respectful (keep their dog on a leash and remember to close the gate!)
 - ii. The meadows were rolling hills, with the beautiful blue sea on one side, and these massive rock formations jutting out the green pastures here and there.
 - iii. And that’s where I saw the sheep. A few dozens of them, widely scattered. Some were eating. Some laying down.
 - iv. Some of them have these black faces giving contrast to their white wool coat, like the one on the bulletin cover.
 - v. I kept my distance so they wouldn’t be spooked, and I took many pictures.
 - vi. They didn’t seem bothered by my presence, so long as I stayed away and didn’t make sudden moves.
 - vii. What I didn’t see was a shepherd.
 - viii. The rocky seashore and maybe fencing I wasn’t seeing kept the sheep contained
 - c. Some sheep ate near other sheep.
 - i. A few chose some yummy grass far from the rest.
 - ii. But all seemed aware of the other sheep.
 - iii. They were casually keeping an eye on one another (and also looking at me, and looking at each other)

- iv. Sometimes they'd baa and call out to one another, like when I got apparently too close to a group which took off running making a ruckus which was echoed by sheep behind me.
 - v. They were looking out for one another.
 - 2. For a city boy like myself, the story of the lost sheep in today's Gospel has always been a mystery wrapped in ancient history.
 - a. In the tradition of the church for centuries, the image of a lost sheep has been a metaphor of that one person who made sinful choices and found themselves in trouble, alone, away from family and community.
 - i. People in the conservative church of my youth would talk about "rescuing the lost" by which they meant preaching to people who weren't part of the church to convert them, to get them to believe in Jesus, to get them to heaven.
 - ii. And Jesus, he was the Good Shepherd (that was in fact the name of my church!) who looked out for them, who brought them in from where they were lost.
 - iii. So, I figured sheep were a bit dumb, stubborn and easily lost. Which maybe was the unflattering view my church had of those who didn't follow Jesus.
 - b. But that's not what the parable is about, really.
 - i. It's about community not about an individual. At least in part.
 - ii. A commentary (*Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* by B. Malina, R. Rohrbaugh. 1992., 118) tells us that for someone to be caring for 100 sheep probably meant they weren't his or her property, but rather part of a larger herd which several shepherds would be tending.
 - iii. It must have been common enough for a sheep to get separated from the flock and even to get lost, because Jesus offers it as a relatable example.
 - iv. One can imagine then that it isn't just the one shepherd looking for the lost sheep, but several shepherds.
 - 1. One can imagine the panic of the shepherd directly responsible for this sheep which he/she doesn't even own!
 - 2. And one can also imagine the joy and relief of finding that wandering sheep, and at the campfire that night, the group of shepherds celebrate and share horror stories of when they had to search for one of their own flock.
 - v. And shepherds, by the way, were looked down upon by society.
 - 1. They weren't seen with respect.
 - 2. Yet here they are the protagonists in a story about how God rejoices when one of "the little ones" is brought back to the flock safely.
 - 3. The sheep in Iona help me see new meaning in this Gospel passage.

- a. Jesus was concerned about people he saw as vulnerable (calls them “little ones”)
 - i. Perhaps like the child he put in their midst and said she was the greatest in the realm of the heavens, perhaps like others who were not cared for.
 - ii. And Jesus is making it the business of the disciples to look out for these “little ones”
- b. So then it’s not just the shepherd who is there to save the day if something happens to one of the “little ones”
 - i. I remember the sheep I encountered were attentive to one another.
 - ii. Sheep can’t count, but they all know they can count on each other
 - iii. Maybe the shepherd notices signs of danger because the 99 sheep are baaing loudly or scattering.
 - iv. Also, a commentary says a lost sheep “will sit down and refuse to move, and bleat incessantly.” (Malina & Rohrbaugh, 118)
 - v. You better believe that the momma to that lost sheep hears and knows their voice and gets moving to find her!
- c. There is joy in heaven, Jesus says, when one of these lost ones is back in the fold.
 - i. Which must mean there must be concern and anguish in heaven when one of these little ones is distanced, or shunned, or forgotten to the point of being lost.
- d. We receive community alerts on our cellphones when a child or a vulnerable person is lost or abducted.
 - i. Not too many years ago, Tracy and I put out our own panicked alert among you to help us find our runaway son, who two days later was found by a church member, who then drove him back home to us.
 - ii. Even if there are many other harder feelings, Oh the relief one feels! Oh the joy one feels when one who was lost is found!
4. The 99 sheep do not distance themselves from the one, nor do they resent having to do whatever it takes to bring the flock back to full strength.
 - a. If we apply this story to our lives from the lens used by the church of my childhood, we understand how sin can distance a person from the rest of the community.
 - i. We can understand how a spouse who cheats severely damages a family
 - ii. We can imagine how a student who steals makes the class feel less safe
 - iii. We can read how a person who kills or abuses someone ends up in jail and makes the town feel on edge.
 - b. We certainly can feel the value of today’s Gospel: God cares for each one of us, and God will not rest until that one who got lost is found and brought back to the fold
 - i. But the Bible and the Iona sheep also leave us thinking of the 99: what would you and I do to facilitate the restoration of that family, the support of that classroom, or the healing of a town shaken by violence?

- c. If we apply this story to our lives from a lens that doesn't judge why or how the sheep was separated, the 99 play an important role still.
 - i. We have a powerful statement to make: we are one community.
 1. No matter whether the one struggles with addiction, or is unhoused.
 2. No matter whether the one is selfish or aloof.
 3. No matter whether the one buys into racist and sexist ideas.
 4. No matter whether the one works hard but without immigration papers
 - ii. Neither the shepherd nor the 99 sheep say of the one: good riddance.
 1. And that's a good thing, because you and I have been in the 99 at times, and we also admit we've been the one at times.
 2. Which is to say, it is hard work to be community, with diversity, with intentionally courageous conversations, with grace.
 3. But God, the God who seeks us out, is committed to it.
5. The shepherd takes a cue from the flock, which keeps an eye out for those sheep in their midst who are vulnerable, taking steps to guard them and if needed bring them back to safety. To be that kind of community, we can take a cue from Jesus, our good shepherd, who constantly sought out those who had gotten pushed to the margins to be point of being separated, even lost.

Reflection questions

1. Share a story when you or someone you love became estranged from the family.
2. In Matthew 18:10–14, what attitude(s) is Jesus inviting when interacting with the “little ones?”
3. When you apply this reading to your life, how is the message challenging you to change?