

“The Church’s Homecoming”

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(Ex 32: 7-14; Ps 51;) I Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

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St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church, New Orleans

I’ve met one of these lost sheep that Jesus spoke of. . . decades ago in my then new pastoral appointment. She was a newcomer to our village – a place more populated by cows than people. She was not someone who’d had a level playing field in life; opportunity had not come knocking at her gate. She constantly patched together part time jobs to make a go of it all. Her two boys were the most, eh, energetic in the youth group: so people would whisper that she and her family came to us rough around the edges.

But she rightly knew her place; the day came and she and her boys stood at the front of that Presbyterian congregation and, in the name of the Holy Triune God, I said their names and poured out the water of grace on their heads and I remember that moment, and her eyes, as I proclaimed the words of the baptismal liturgy: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people. . . ” (I Peter 2:9).

The whole congregation knew her story – we lived in a village after all – we had heard about the ways life was stacked against her: an emotionally eruptive partner; the choke of money worries.

But she had learned the gospel – she knew she was someone in the eyes of God, she knew that she was marked and claimed by the power of Christ, she knew she belonged, just like the rest of us.

She knew that though the troubles had not vanished though they were reordered – the baptismal water said what was most true about her and her boys. With her, we were all telling her story.

A few years later Habitat for Humanity came to our small town, and built a house for her. The neighbors – some of them fellow church members – complained because the rumor was that she would not have to pay any mortgage, and how could that be fair?

If we use the language of the Gospel reading for today we would say that the uninformed 99 had not heard properly about how persons still must make mortgage payments and they must share in what Habitat calls sweat equity. Or even if the 99 knew of these things they still complained about people getting ‘handouts.’ God’s newly found 1 was not welcomed by the 99.

I visited that place a few years later after I had moved away and heard the news that this 1 sheep has left that little church and gone to another church in town: one of the Presbyterian

sheep summarized “we weren’t friendly or welcoming enough. In the end she was too different from the rest of us.” Yes, we, the 99.

It is exactly this way, you and I know: there is this long-standing tension between the 99 and the 1 of this parable. The text describes them as opposites. One is a sinner, the 99 are righteous. It is an old, old division.

This is a tension alive and well in our churches. I grew up with a sense of the 99. I only have to think about my home church in Indianapolis to have an image of what the 99 look like.

There were 3,500 of them in that flock when I was growing up – members, baptized, bible studiers, committee representatives, fellowship organizers, pledge makers, Sunday school teachers – the 99 in droves, being righteous.

My experience of the people who were the 1’s at my home church is that they spoke so openly about being found – that they still stood out

- mixed in among the 99 these *found ones’* former status of *being the lost ones* kept peeking through,
- they didn’t fit in with the righteous. They were a little too transparent, thankful, witness-y. They seemed to remind the 99 a bit too much of being lost.

It’s an old division and even when the lost one is found sometimes the flock doesn’t want to make room.

Hear again the introduction to today’s gospel lection: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”

There it is: the 99 complaining about the one... the Pharisees and the scribes complaining about the people with whom Jesus eats.

There we have it: what was the grumbling by the religious and legal leaders of the Jews *is now* the very grumbling of some Christians - about who should be a part of the church.

But Jesus tells a parable that makes it clear: the cheaters and sinners belong also. And Jesus doesn’t just tell one parable, according to Luke. There are, not only, the two parables read today, but these two are followed by their famous relative – the prodigal son.

God the shepherd and God the seeking woman is joined by the prodigal God. The gospel truth of repentance and welcome is purposely repeated three times, bearing down like the relentless rays of the southern sun – *the lost ones belong; welcome them home.*

And that is one way we read this passage in Luke: *God persists in finding the lost one, and the 99 welcome the lost one home because it is God who brings them home.* That is a fine message. You and I have heard it before. Any of us who have spent a lifetime in church know this message.

Over at Austin seminary there are 43 first year students engaged in their first weeks of seminary courses; they are in a way wrestling with exactly this tension of lost and found. They represent 11 different denominations across 4 degree programs and, have begun certain conversations that will endure throughout their seminary days: what is ministry, who does it, who authorizes it, what does ministry mean in the midst of changes in church and society.

- They are immersed in learning the history of the church, theology, bible and its languages, worship, pastoral care, mission and evangelism, ethics, preaching and on and on
- they are immersed in questions about church in the 21st century.

You can imagine the breadth of these discussions. And always – our conversations spill over into discussions of *who is church* – who is included and welcomed, who is not.

Sometimes these discussions get a little heated involving questions about the identity of the 99's and the 1's:

- Some saying there's a particular repentance checklist that must be adhered to before one becomes the 99.
- Others challenging: how can you hold that view on political - social issues and say that's ok for church?
- *And through all of this: how do we not make golden calves of our convictions?*

Who is church? is a live question on campus. And we could just look to Luke and steadfastly say that every lost one should be welcomed because God has said so. Everyone, no matter where they align on issues, no matter what they've done, everyone welcome home. Even that sheep, even that coin. *Again, it is a fine message, one you and I have heard before.*

But isn't there deeper gospel truth today: It is similar, just slightly more complicated; it goes like this:

- The reason we 99 cease any grumbling and welcome repentant sinners is because *we are still* repentant sinners.
- The 99 have, and continue to be, the ONE over and over again: lost and found, lost and found.
- The gospel truth is this: the reason I am welcomed is because I am a rescued one, a forgiven sinner, a – as one of my theology professors said - *a still-loyal-betrayer of God's ways in the world...* mercifully brought home on the shephard's shoulders.

Still sinning . . . but welcome, welcome home, again.

So (this is a liturgy professor speaking, remember) according to the father of Presbyterianism John Calvin, our Sunday liturgy always opens with a prayer of corporate confession of sin:

- We have lost our way, "strayed. . . like lost sheep" so goes an old prayer of Confession of Sin, we have not lived as we were created to be.

- We are the stiff-necked people, still, fashioning our own idols to worship
- The 16th century reformer knew that none of us could climb a ladder of perfect holiness after baptism, but that we need, for our own health and well being, a return to wholeness in God again and again each Lord’s Day service.

Because even the 99 *still get lost*:

- we lose our way in our own troubles,
- we lose our way and harm others with small slights and greater aggressions;
- we lose our way and give up grappling with how best to be God’s love to the world in need;
- we lose our way as we don’t trust that we are precious to God;
- we forget the ordering of our baptismal waters and that mighty water of grace
- daily we lose our way.
- We the 99 do these things we ought not to do,
- And we leave undone the things we ought to do.
- We live in fragmented and estranged ways, skirting the green pasture land prepared for us now.

Another contemporary writer (Gordon Lathrop, drawing on Martin Luther) summarizes this so well, calling all of us beggars before God.

- Left to ourselves we cannot make things right.
- For all that we can and can’t do – we are still and always *bowed down* before the Holy Almighty One.

All of us, even we who think we are solidly among the 99, are still the ones who were and are lost and return. In the words of our Epistle this morning – the words of Paul:

- The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.¹⁶ But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life.

But God – like the woman looking for the lost coin, lights the lamp; God IS a persistent shepherd, and wills to make redemptive welcome known to us again and again.

- Even our Presbyterian funeral prayer sounds this out: “Acknowledge, we humbly pray, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming.” (*Book of Common Worship*, p. 925)

There is an image of this Gospel parable: some of you may know it – the 3C marble statue of a shepherd with lamb across his shoulders. It is in Rome now, in a Vatican Museum.

But this image lived in Christian imaginations even earlier than the 3rd c ; we know this because a drawing of the shepherd shouldering a lamb appears in the Christian catacombs – where the early followers of Jesus Christ were buried.

Who does the shepherd look for? Who is being carried?

- Even the dead, announces this picture in those ancient catacombs.
- And if the dead are being carried, surely the suffering too.
- Who is being carried home?
- We are – most certainly, again and again.
- Those parts of ourselves that have been lost to us are being carried,
- and us as we have been lost to each another in families, marriages, workplaces, we are being carried.
- Our nation in its repentance is carried
- – our world in its repentance is carried –
- our denomination, our local congregations, the church universal – all carried,
- for God is the persistent shepherd, willing to come search for us and pick us up again and again.

The Pharisees and scribes grumbled, saying this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.

And the church of Jesus Christ says **thank God** because that is what we are, sinners, all of us *repeatedly* brought back into the fold by God's care.

We, the 99 of the church, are only different from those newly found ones because we've been here a little longer– only differing in that *we know* we are forgiven and carried home.

This little weekly gathering is our good pasture.

- Our gathering together to pray, to hear the Word, to share in Christ's holy meal, to offer of ourselves to the world, to be sent forth as witnesses – and in all of this our constant honest repenting, and returning to God, and trusting in God's mercy, remembering that the baptismal waters say what is most true about us
- this Sunday gathering is our good pasture – the shepherd has brought us home.

So welcome home.

It is a greeting for more than a return from the summer months.

welcome home today.

It is a greeting for more than just the start up of Church activities in September

Welcome home.

It is a greeting for each and every one of us

Fellow forgiven sinners, *welcome home* - God's very words to us each and every Sunday, *welcome home*; and therefore our words to every seeking soul who might enter these doors.

Because God the shepherd is at work to carry everyone home.