

Love In A World on Fire: The Worth of One

Luke 15:1-10, Ezek 34:11-12, 14-16

Good morning! It is great to be together today. Many of us have experienced a lot more time at home over the past 4 months than normal. Alice and I decided in May that we would learn some Spanish together. We've been listening to a series called Pimsleur. With this method you mostly learn by listening and repeating, there has been very little reading. As we talk our daily walk around the neighborhood listening to our Pimsleur lessons on earbuds and confusing people with our halting Spanish as we practice—"would you like something cold to drink?" "It costs twelve or thirteen pesos." One thing that is key to learning with this series is repetition. Each lesson we learn some new words, repeating them over and over, then go on to a conversation that mostly is review of words we've already learned, and then it comes back to reinforce the new words at the end of the lesson. I'm amazed at how much we've learned! Its almost entirely learning by repetition.

In today's gospel reading Jesus is using repetition to make a point. We heard two very similar stories Jesus told a group of grumbling religious leaders. In fact he told them THREE stories, and they all were versions of the same story. The third story is the story of the prodigal son. You can read it in the rest of Luke chapter 15. Why did Jesus tell this same story in three different ways? Why did Luke take a whole chapter to put all three of the stories into his gospel? The reason for all of this repetition is that Jesus (and Luke) were making a very important point. In fact, I think these stories teach us the MOST important things we can know about God and about other people. Today I want to you remember two things—1) God seeks each of us and celebrates when he finds us, and 2) we are called to see everyone like God does—beloved ones to care for.

What do each of these stories have in common? They are all stories of the lost and found. In each one something precious is lost, there is a search, the lost thing is found, and there is a celebration. And all of these are stories about God. The main character in each parable represents God-- the shepherd looking for a sheep, the woman looking for a coin, and

the father looking for his son. In each case it is God who has lost something precious, God who goes searching, God who finds, and God who celebrates the recovery of the lost. This is what Jesus tells us God is like, so we should pay attention. The real God seeks the lost and he throws a party to welcome each of us home! Is that your picture of God?

Notice what does NOT happen in these stories. There isn't any criticism of the lost. They aren't called bad or evil—the problem is they are *lost*. The sheep gets lost because it wandered away. That is just how sheep are. The coin is lost because of someone else's carelessness. It didn't do anything wrong, but it is lost all the same. The son is lost because of his own rebellion. The focus is not on how they got lost, the focus of the story is how they get found. We all get found because God seeks us! There is joy in heaven for each one that is found! The shepherd searches until he finds the lost sheep—then he picks it up on his shoulders rejoicing! Jesus carries us back home, holding us close!

Jesus called himself the good shepherd. He said he came to seek and to save the lost. The shepherd doesn't punish the sheep, he sacrifices for the sheep! Jesus said the good shepherd lays down his *life* for the sheep! That is what he did for you and for me. Jesus' point in each of these stories is that God is seeking the lost. God is seeking the lost. He isn't mad, he isn't waiting for an apology, he is searching to bring us home. He is ready to celebrate as soon as we are found. *That* is what God is like.

This picture of God as our shepherd runs all through Scripture. We saw it in our call to worship this morning—from the most famous Psalm of all, the 23rd. The Lord is my shepherd, he'll provide all I need! Because he cares for us, we lack nothing! That is good news indeed! Our first reading from Ezekiel also shows us what kind of shepherd God is—God says "I myself will search for and find my sheep. I'll rescue them from all the places they are scattered. I'll bring them home. I'll give them good food and tend them and let them lie down in peace. I'll search for the ones who stray and bring them safely home again. I'll bind up the injured and strengthen the weak." THAT is what God's care for you looks like! Despite our wandering off, despite our rebellion, despite our hurts, he is ready to heal us and to bring us home!

Pastor A.W. Tozer said that "what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." What we think about God is the most important thing about

us! What comes into your mind when you think about God? You have a picture of God that you carry around with you everywhere. It colors how you act and how you think. Jesus told these stories—repeating his point over and over—to correct our distorted picture of God. Remember this if you remember nothing else from today—God is missing you. He can't wait to welcome you home! He is like the father who was scanning the horizon looking for his rebellious child to return. God is can't wait to run out and welcome each and every lost one home! Jesus wants us to know what God is *really* like.

That is the first lesson of these stories—getting the right view about God. The true God is searching to care for us and bring us home. Because God cares for each of us, that leads us to the second lesson. It is about how we should treat other people—about getting the right view of others. Jesus tells these stories to a group of religious leaders who were sinning by having the wrong view of other people. They call some other group “sinners” and ignore their own sin. They label people outsiders so they can de-humanize them instead of caring for them. In fact, Jesus' main point in the third story in this group, the prodigal son story, is that these religious leaders were actually MORE lost in their sin than the tax collectors and prostitutes because they don't even realize their problem. It is unconscious.

This second lesson about how WE are to treat other people. It is not about whether those others are sinners—all of us are sinners, don't get distracted by that! No—this lesson isn't about *judging* people (that is a job we are not qualified for!). This lesson is about *caring* for others and valuing them, the way that our Good Shepherd values us. He sees our worth, he tells us that each of us has value, so we are called to cherish the worth of each and every one we meet.

Jesus wants us to care for the lost, for the hurting, for the oppressed. To run out looking for the ones in danger. He wants us to be those friends and neighbors celebrating each homecoming. We should be there cheering each other on and helping each other out! These stories remind us to look at people just as God does. When we see those who are on the margins, who are getting the short end of the stick, who are oppressed, we should not label them as “other” but see them the same way that God does. Jesus' purpose is to remind us that we are ALL sent to help those who are downtrodden. The religious people in both Ezekiel's

time and Jesus' time preferred to de-humanize and take advantage of people on the margins—when they were called to care for them. To lift them up instead of pushing them down.

These stories tell us that we risk the same mistake. When we start labeling others we look down on them and exclude them instead of giving them the respect and care they deserve. We fail to notice that we are all fundamentally the same! This is not just about having empathy for people in different circumstances from us, although that is important. It is about recognizing the WORTH of each person. God made us in a rich diversity so that Christ's body can be a glorious unity.

Right now many are recognizing anew the reality of racism and the harm it is still doing in our society today. We need to be honest that the church—the white church—has often failed to call out injustice. Sometimes we have acted like those religious leaders Jesus was talking to and preferred to label some people as less than—to dehumanize our brothers and sisters instead of seeking to care and advocate for them and to walk alongside them and learn from them. We have labeled whole groups of people as less than when Jesus calls us to value each and every person. The heart of God is for us to see the intrinsic worth of every person. The hashtag black lives matter has moved to forefront of social media. I've seen some people argue back that "All Lives Matter." Well of course all lives matter, but that doesn't negate the need for us to be clear that Black Lives do indeed Matter. One of the best responses I've seen to that pointed to this very story of the lost sheep. Jesus said that the shepherd left the 99—almost his whole flock—out in the wild while he searched for the lost sheep. The 99 say "what about us? Don't WE matter?" Of course they matter, but the shepherd goes to care for the sheep who is in danger. The one who is at risk. The lives we need to pay particular attention to are those that are at the most risk. That is what loving our neighbor looks like.

God is calling us as a church to move out of our comfort zone and to speak out for the last and the least and left behind. Jesus is calling us to risk caring for all, not just our comfortable circle of familiar friends.

There is a reason that cities large and small all over the country and the world have seen Black Lives Matter protests all month long. It is well-founded anger and frustration. I am glad that so many of you have signed up to join the class on Race Talk that starts tomorrow. This is

an urgent conversation that we all need to have. Pastor Chris and I are excited to join you in that as learners and listeners alongside you. We will also post a collection of resources for you on our website this week so you can do some additional investigating yourself. I encourage you to watch the video by Phil Vischer—the creator of VeggieTales. It is only about 17 minutes long and he addresses many of the questions you might be asking—why is this still an issue, why can't they just let it go? Is it really so bad?

If Jesus created hashtags the one for this story one might have been lost sheep matter. The shepherd is searching for the one who is in danger because EVERY life matters. Because all of us are made in God's image and are precious. That's why the shepherd is trying to rescue the one who is at risk. Black lives matter is important because we see, over and over again, that black lives are at unfair risk. They need protection right now. That is who the good shepherd rushes to help, and that is who we are called to seek and to stand up for as well. Our second lesson is about how we see other people. Racism is a distorted lens that makes us treat some people badly. It makes us sin.

Jarvis Williams is a black Baptist seminary professor and pastor. He wrote a column this week in *Christianity Today*. He said that: "Racism is opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and against God's vision to redeem and unify creation through Christ. God recreates through Christ a diversity of different tongues, tribes, peoples and nations into one new (but diverse) people." Do you see? We are made to be together, not apart! Williams goes on: "God commands us to live in pursuit of reconciled community with one another and with our neighbors in anticipation of the age to come." We are COMMANDED to pursue reconciliation—with each other and with our neighbors. Across political lines, across cultural lines, across racial and ethnic lines. We are supposed to be reconcilers. Peacemakers. That is why God calls us to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

Williams says that "Christians should be able to stand up with their Bibles open and say without hesitation that black lives certainly matter, have dignity, worth, and value, just as non-black lives do. God created black people in his image. God redeems black lives in Christ. Black lives matter to God because the Bible teaches that they matter." That is one of the lessons of our parables today.

As we walk with God we will be empowered to love, to show mercy and to seek justice—for ALL of our brothers and sisters. That is what love looks like today. We are all people made in God's image. Every single image bearer has inestimable worth and dignity. Each one is worthy of leaving the 99 to find and to save. THAT is who our neighbors are! Let's start acting like it.

Let's pray: Lord Jesus--- forgive us for holding onto a false picture of an angry God. Help us to recognize the Good Shepherd and hold us close as you bring us home! And forgive us for being thoughtless, for going with the flow of hate and ignorance in our culture, for joining in the heresy that dehumanizes others. Open our eyes to see others like you see them and to seek justice and love like you love. In Jesus; name and in the power of the Holy Spirit we ask it!

Amen!

Pastoral Prayer:

Lord, thank you for calling us to yourself. Thank you for loving us even when we are unlovable. Thank you for hearing our prayers. Lord in your mercy: **Hear our Prayers**

Lord, we are missing our brother Lloyd. Comfort Nancy, his children, and all of us who are missing him and grant him rest and good fishing until we meet again. Thank you for letting so many join to remember him—please protect us all from illness. Be with all of us who are grieving loved ones, including the Roberts and the Saxons. Lord in your mercy: **Hear our Prayer**

Lord, please bless those who are sick and those who are recovering. We lift up Bert Clawson, Diane Barnhart, Mickey's sister Nell, and all who are battling cancer like Kitty and

Susan. We celebrate Jerry Felder's healing and return to his home. Lord please bless and heal your people. Lord in your mercy: **Hear our Prayers**

Lord, we pray for your world, which is torn by conflict and disease and pollution. We pray for our leaders, for peace, for wisdom and justice. Lord in your mercy: **Hear our Prayers**

Lord, we pray for your church. Guide us and empower us to be your people and to join in your rescue mission. Help us to be faithful and true. Lord in your mercy: **Hear our Prayers**

Lord, we especially pray for those who are battling COVID—use their skill and wisdom to bring us effective treatments and vaccines, and protect us all while we wait. Lord in your mercy: **Hear our Prayers**

Finally, Lord we pray for the lonely, the lost, the poor, the unemployed, the oppressed. For all of those out in the highways and the hedges. Help us to bring them into your great feast and to share your love with them. Lord in your mercy: **Hear our Prayers Amen**

Benediction:

May the love of God the Father enfold us. **May the grace of God the Son uphold us.**

May the power of God the Spirit set us free **to love and serve all we meet.**

Now to God, who by the means of the power working in us

is able to do so much more than we can ask or even think,

to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all times, for ever and ever. Amen