

Sunday September 15th, 2019
14th after Pentecost

PRAYER: O Christ, who was crucified for breaking bread with sinners, welcome us into your presence. We are the foremost among sinners, but having blasphemed your name, now we would bless it; having persecuted your spirit, now we would receive it. We come before you seeking mercy; we kneel before you asking forgiveness. Let your grace overflow upon us, that we might be filled with your faith and love. To you, the immortal, invisible Christ of God, we humbly give honour and glory, forever and ever. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: In writing to the Corinthian Church the Apostle Paul turns his attention to the part of worship that involves the giving of tithes and offerings. These are his words, “And now about the collection in aid of God’s people. Every Sunday each of you is to put aside and keep by him a sum in proportion to his gains.” (1 Cor. 16:1, 2) Let us now give to God that which we set aside to honour his love and grace to us.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O Wondrous, amazing God, all around us we see the power, the creativity and graciousness of your presence. The skies rumble and flash and we are frightened but also strangely attracted. The waters rush and foam and we long to move away but also to draw closer. What is it Lord that makes us long to flee from you but at the same time draw ever closer? How we long to be embraced by you but we grow weak at the knees when we consider the possibility. Like Elijah long ago we long to hide in the cave and see evidence of your presence at a distance, but you call us out into the whirlwind and find you not in the violence of nature but in the still small voice speaking to us.

We are more than ever aware that you are a gentleman God. You are infinitely patient with us, waiting to be received out of our love and openness. How many times have you waited wondering when if ever we would turn to you? How long have you endured our foolishness as we carry burdens you have offered to bear for us? How long have you wept when we have held grudges and refused to forgive only ending up punishing ourselves?

How you must watch in open mouthed astonishment as we have turned away from one another, thinking that we were turning to you. You have watched as faithfulness has faded from the land, as kindness fell victim to neglect, as trust is strained and broken. You have watched us walk in and out of church, offering you our tithes while withholding our lives, and you have been amazed that we did not hear the grieving of creation. We did not pay attention to nature’s sorrow; as beasts in the field, birds in the air and fish in the sea-have vanished. The fruits of the trees rotted, the crops in the fields are choked by weeds. Our toil turned empty, our art became lament, our eyes scrutinize every person we met, and we wondered: Is he my enemy? Is she my competition? In all the land no one asks” Isn’t he my brother? Isn’t she my sister? Isn’t that little one my child? Isn’t that elder one my parent?

Help us Lord! Forgive us, for we have sinned! Your prophet declared that you desire not sacrifice but mercy to our neighbours. You desire love and not liturgy. You desire righteousness and not solemn assemblies.

O God, even now as the church activities resume, we see the opportunity for a new day. We see opportunity to be more engaged in our community of faith. We have opportunity to increase our generosity and redouble our efforts to love.

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As we seek to serve you this new season, may you speak to us and call us to assure that no program is lacking from leadership, or resources or opportunities. May our godly play, our youth programs, Talk-back, First Serving, choir and all the other ways we seek to serve and reach out in your name; find this year, a year to remember. A year when lives are changed, and Christ is proclaimed and your glory is evident to all. Come to us Good Shepherd. Call to us and bring us from our state of lostness so all may rejoice. For this we ask in the name of the Good Shepherd, who taught us to pray together....

BENEDICTION: Let not our love for one another be like a hot wind blowing out of the bare heights of the desert. Let it be like a spring whose waters never fail, pouring forth from the fountain of God. (Isaiah 58:11 and Revelation 21:6)

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Luke 15:1-10
“What does it Mean to be Lost?”

Like so many of you I have found the news stories of recent tragedies around the world very disturbing: Bahamas under water, Hong Kong in turmoil, hurricanes, and then an earthquake like the one a few years back in New Zealand. Whenever I think of New Zealand (a place I'd love to visit sometime) I am always taken to a story, that I may have already shared with you but it's still a good one.

It is the story of *Shrek*. What might surprise you is that I am not referring to the green ogre that has graced the film screens of this world four times and is voiced by Toronto's own Mike Meyer. The *Shrek* I am talking about was named after the green ogre, but in actual fact isn't green at all. This Shrek from the country of New Zealand is a sheep. Actually, he is a Moirés ram.

No one knows really where Shrek came from, but for six years Shrek roamed free in the highlands of New Zealand. He had plenty of grass to eat, water to drink and he would hide in a cave when the weather was bad. For these six years Shrek never had his fleece so much as trimmed and as we know, sheep are raised to produce wool and lots of it. When Shrek was first spotted, after six years, his huge fluffy fleece made him unrecognizable as a sheep.

In fact, the news media of New Zealand referred to him at first as some “biblical creature” of unknown origin and unknown nature. When Shrek was finally captured and sheered, his fleece weighed sixty pounds. That is sixty pounds of wool, or enough material to make 20 men's suits. What was really surprising was that Shrek was still able to walk with so much extra weight, as most sheep would collapse under the burden.

When Shrek was finally sheered, they did what you would expect, they made a television special out of it, which you can see on the internet by a word search for “Shrek the sheep”. Tens of thousands of people tuned in to watch the New Zealand sheering champion shear Shrek by hand, as they had to be careful not to harm him. In fact, they had a coat made for him, lest his exposure to the cooler air might give him pneumonia.

The sixty-pound fleece was sold for charity and made 10,000 dollars. Shrek became a celebrity and he was introduced to another escaped sheep, a female appropriately named Fiona. Sadly, Shrek has since died but his legend lives on. In thinking about Shrek, I began to wonder; why did Jesus, on more than one occasion refer to us as sheep? Besides the fact that his listeners would immediately understand the reference and were familiar with sheep, why did he choose these beasts to represent people in his teaching? Why not goats, cats, or my personal favourite, hippopotami?

Every time Jesus mentions sheep or shepherds, you and I are always the sheep, except for one important exception, when Jesus is referred to as the Lamb of God. Setting that one reference about Jesus calling himself the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” aside for the moment, have you ever considered what sheep are like?

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I mean really thought about them. I should have had Janet Dickson give us a lesson on sheep since she grew up on a sheep farm and was born into the Lamb family. Sheep are, by nature, notoriously stupid and stubborn creatures. Sheep are by nature prone to wander, often times into dangerous situations and sometimes they walk blindly to their own demise.

They are helpless to defend themselves and as Phillip Keller, who wrote the classic *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*, points out. Sheep require more attention than any other animal on the planet. As Shepherds know, sheep must be led to places to eat, need helping in birthing (called lambing season) and sometimes don't know enough to get in out of bad weather.

The expression we use in English, "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence", likely has its origin among English sheep farmers who noticed that no matter how wonderful their grazing land was, their sheep were always prone to find a hole in the fence and make their way through it to "greener pastures". On top of that, you may not be aware that sheep stink. I don't know if Jesus implied this in his illustration but the fact remains that sheep really get ripe, especially when wet.

So, taking all this into account, why do you think Jesus chose sheep? Was he being insulting, or was he trying to say something about the nature of humanity and the nature of God? To me, it is obvious that in today's passage, Jesus is responding to the Pharisees and teachers of the law who complained rather loudly, about Jesus dining with tax-collectors and other sinners.

The "kosher cops" thought it was unseemly for someone with Jesus' obvious wisdom and charisma, not to mention his healing skills, to be seen with such disreputable people. Jesus' point is quite clear. All these critics seem to be able to focus on, is public perception and reputation. They cannot or more accurately, will not, see the larger picture. The larger picture consisting of what God wants to do, and how God's heart works in relation to us, the sheep.

So, Jesus does what Jesus does best and tells a little story. He talks about a shepherd who had worked hard all day looking after his flock, who as I mentioned, could not manage themselves. As he brings his sheep in for the night, he notices that one of his 100 sheep is missing. The first point Jesus makes is that this shepherd, representing God in the story, knows his sheep. He has known them all their lives.

Notice that there was no role call or no head count; the shepherd just knew one of his beloved sheep was missing. So, what does the shepherd do? He leaves the ninety-nine sheep corralled, and he goes and searches for the lost sheep. Perhaps it would help us to appreciate this story more, if we remember what it is like to be lost. To be separated from familiar people and places.

It is also implied that this incident occurs after dark, when long shadows play tricks on the mind. Maybe this sheep was a male and refused to ask for directions, but I digress.

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Jesus' intention in this story is to make his listeners remember that feeling of being lost: feelings of fear, loneliness, and the loss of better judgment. To make matters worse, and this is implied in this parable, there is the shame of knowing that the lost sheep is responsible for its situation. It wandered off by its own accord. It is into this terrifying situation the Good Shepherd enters on behalf of the lost.

We forget with modern farming methods and big factory farms how farming in Jesus' day implied a greater intimacy with the land and animals one was entrusted with. Instead of massive land holdings, millions of dollars in machinery, and animals too numerous to count; Shepherds in Jesus' day worked hands on every day with their beloved sheep. I guess the closest we can come today to how the shepherd felt in this parable, might be how we feel when our precious pet goes missing.

In our society we invest a great deal of resources and emotional attachment to our pets. Ask many pet owners and they will tell you that Fluffy or Fido, are more like family than property. People will do almost anything for their pets. Including, as I read a story from Leamington Ontario, pay a large amount of money to have their pet cremated and buried or put in a fancy urn.

The Good Shepherd in Jesus' story is something like how we are in caring for our pets. The Good Shepherds drops everything to give his beloved animal the care it needs. This is true, even if it means leaving the other sheep where they are, only to expend energy, resources and time to hunt down the one that is lost. Remember that this search is made after dark, meaning that the shepherd is risking his very life to find that lost sheep.

After dark, wild animals prowled and bandits attacked, the walking is treacherous but the shepherd goes searching anyway. You must understand the very depth of the love this shepherd has, which is confirmed even further when the shepherd returns with the lost sheep. The shepherd is so overjoyed that he calls his friends and neighbours over to celebrate with him that he has found his lost sheep.

The point of the story was not lost on Jesus' listeners. The shepherd is of course God, the ninety-nine are the religious leaders, and others who sincerely try to follow God, and the lost sheep; well that's all of us at one time or another, but here specifically it is the tax-collectors and sinners Jesus is dining with. The image of this shepherd should touch us deeply. This picture of God should touch us deeply.

Jesus is stating that God loves the lost, which is all of us according to 1 Peter 2:25 which reads, "For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." Jesus pictures God as willing to leave everything behind to search for us. John writes, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." How could the Pharisees condemn Jesus for doing what God's heart demands?

A modern picture of what Jesus is referring to can be found in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina.

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It is the image of a man, who after almost a week of waiting to be rescued, refused to board a bus that was ready to take him to safety. After all he had suffered; he refused to leave his spot on the road that he occupied. His reason? They wouldn't let his dog on the bus with him. He would not sacrifice his beloved pet even if it meant compromising his personal safety.

In the midst of the chaos of the hurricane aftermath, Nate Berkus (a regular correspondent for Oprah Winfrey, and a man who had suffered his own personal loss in the Tsunami that hit Sri Lanka only months before), received news of this man. Nate jumped into his car drove down to New Orleans and picked the man and his dog up and agreed to take them anywhere they wished to go.

The man broke down and wept in Nate's arms with the relief of knowing his dog would be safe. It's a great story, but more than that, it shows the depth of a person's heart for their pets. Imagine then how much more God's heart yearns for us.

Perhaps it seems ridiculous to us that someone like Nate would drive all that way to help a man save his dog, or a shepherd risk everything to save a sheep when they were a dime a dozen in Jesus day. But such is the nature of God's heart; to love fully, deeply, and with no regard to himself. It the same message Jesus says in Matthew 6:26 "Look at the birds. They don't need to plant or harvest or put food in barns because your heavenly Father feeds them. And you are far more valuable to him than they are."

God's love so great that God would spare not even his own son is rescuing the lost. So, now I go back to my original question; why did Jesus refer to us as being sheep? Are we sheep? Are we high maintenance creatures? Are we easily led astray, chasing greener pastures? Have we neglected our own personal care by the shepherd for so long that we like Shrek the sheep of New Zealand, are no longer recognizable as the person we were created to be?

And now the hard question; are we lost? Not necessarily in terms of geography, but in terms of our hearts. Are you lost in a job you cannot stand and is slowly killing your spirit? Are you lost in a relationship that is anything but life affirming? Are you lost spiritually, where you don't know which way to turn? Are you fearful, anxious, lonely, and without hope? Are the signs of our being lost all over us and apparent to everyone?

Has the burden of sin, guilt and regret built up so much; that we can barely stand under the weight of this unholy fleece? Is the stink of bad choices and bad habits emanating from us? Have we been stupid, careless, or reckless? Have we gone down pathways that ultimately place our relationships, our careers, our bodies and our very lives in jeopardy? If any of this is true and I am sure at least one thing applies to all of us, then you are a sheep. "And we like all sheep are led astray."

The good news is that there is a Good Shepherd who seeks us out, places us on his shoulders and brings us home to safety. No matter how lost you are, he can find you.

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Maybe he is even finding you here this morning, wanting to pick you up and bring you safely into the fold. For those of us, perhaps not as lost as others, who have met the Good Shepherd and are already in the fold; there is an important lesson for us as well.

There will be times, perhaps many times, when the Good Shepherd will have to spend his energy and time through his body the church to seek that lost sheep. The church will be called on to focus its resources not on the ninety-nine but on the one. Perhaps the ninety-nine may get resentful of the Good Shepherds focus on the dirty, smelly, un-sheered sheep that are everywhere in this world, but that is the heart of the shepherd.

It is no less than what we would do for those people or even pets we love. The point is that we are his sheep and this is his pasture and his sheep fold. He knows us all intimately, and he knows whether we are lost or in the fold. We can no more criticize God for his sacrificial love for those lost souls than we can criticize someone for spending extravagantly on their children. And further to this point, we are called to celebrate and rejoice with the Good Shepherd when one of the lost sheep is recovered.

Love then, especially God's love, knows no limits and can meet you no matter how lost you feel you are. Reach out to him and you will find he is already reaching out to you. Let God find you wherever you are, and you will find that being found, is far more rewarding than being lost. Open your heart to the Good Shepherd even now and he will turn your "Baaaaaad Day" into a day of new hope and new life.

For the good news is that when we are lost, we can be found.