

September 12, 2010

Scripture: Luke 15:1-10

Sermon: "What's missing?"

The Parable of the Lost Sheep. The Parable of the Lost Coin. Both are familiar stories to us. These stories that talk about cornerstones of our faith: repentance and joy. We can all probably say that we have been lost and are thankful that we were found. We know that these stories tell us about our God who is so loving, so caring, so determined to find and bring home all of God's children. And because of that, I struggled to find something new to say this week.

Until I noticed that as I meditated on this scripture this week, it was not the lost sheep or the lost coin that became my focus. My attention was drawn to the 99 sheep that were left behind in the wilderness. My attention began to focus on the 9 coins left in this woman's drawer. 99 sheep left in the wilderness. And the fact that the shepherd actually left 99 sheep in the wilderness.

It has always bothered me that this shepherd left 99 sheep in the wilderness basically defenseless against prey, defenseless their own sense of wandering, defenseless against whatever.

99 sheep were left in the field. I have always wondered what they thought when they saw their shepherd go tearing off across the field, in an all fire hurry. Maybe they looked around and did a head count. "There is 99 of us. We are missing one." Would these sheep even miss the one? Or would they go about their business: enjoying the scenery, eating the grass, simply being sheep. Or maybe as many of us would say if we were a part of the 99 left in the field: Where is he going? 99 out of a 100. That's not bad.

Or maybe these are just questions and feelings that I am projecting on the sheep. I fully admit to being a city girl.

The 99 sheep in the field kept coming up in my mind throughout this week. What about the 99 sheep? What happens to them? The shepherd is leaving the 99 to go in search for one. We as readers don't hear if the shepherd comes back to the 99. All we know is that when the shepherd finds the one, he rejoices. And when he gets home, he throws a party. Are the 99 still in the field?

Leaving the 99. Searching for one.

Our story takes place today as Jesus continues his journey to Jerusalem. Jesus has been traveling and teaching his along the way. And along the way, he has been having a lot of dinners. Either hosting them or going to people's houses and the topic is always the same: The coming of God's kingdom. And now in our story, Jesus is again hosting a dinner for high officials and tax collectors. Jesus has invited respected teachers of the faith and people who were not so respected in society. And here is the kicker: Jesus actually expected everyone to sit at the table together. What was he thinking? He didn't even use place cards to assign seats. He didn't even make sure that he kept the groups separate. He didn't even give priority seating to the high officials and respected teachers. He wanted them to ... sit together, beside each other, to break bread together. Teacher beside sinner. Pharisee beside tax collector. He wanted his flock together at the table. He

wanted the 99 sheep there with all lost sheep that he had just brought back into the fold. He wanted his flock together as one: one body, one fellowship, one table of God's kingdom.

And so the grumbling starts: What is Jesus thinking? He invites us into his home along with these people. He expects us to eat with them. And not only that he wants us to welcome them as brothers and sisters in faith. Doesn't he know that they were "lost" for a reason? They were unclean. God doesn't want them at God's table. These people have broken the law. They are unacceptable to God. The grumbling gets louder. And Jesus sees a ministry moment. Jesus sees a teaching moment for all those gathered around this table.

He tells these parables using a shepherd and a woman. Jesus purposely asks his question: Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? Well, Jesus-no one would. You've got 99 out of a 100. That's pretty good. Jesus, the wilderness is a dangerous place. You are risking a lot by leaving the 99 there. You could end up losing the whole 100. Everyone knows that. You just say well, I guess I have lost that one.

And Jesus says no. God is like a shepherd who will search high and low for that one lost sheep. God will risk everything, everything to find that one. Nothing is of so little value that God will not search everywhere for that one child of God.

Leaving that 99. Searching for one. Taking risks. Trusting that the 99 will be there when you get back. Leaving that 99 and searching for the one.

As our story ends, we are still left with questions. Jesus, you left the 99. We get that you want us to understand that God will search for us always and not stop until God finds us. We got that, but you left the 99. Jesus, would you really leave the 99? Would you really take that risk? And Jesus answers us with questions of his own: who are you in this story? Are you the Lost sheep or are you the 99? Are you lost or are you found? And how do you know? And are you sure of what "group" you fall into?

We pause a moment. We were all so sure that we were a part of the 99 left behind. But could we really be a lost sheep? Could we really be lost? Could we really need to be found? Leaving the 99. Searching for one.

And we are then told: My child, even the 99 are precious to me. They are the community of God's people. They are not complete without the one. They will never be complete until that one is found. God yearns for a restored relationship with all of God's children. God yearns for that day when all of God's children are brought home. We were created to be in relationship with God and with one another. And until all the lost sheep are found, our community is not complete. Our relationship with God is not fulfilled. The promise of the coming of God's kingdom is so important and is such a gift that God would risk all to make God's community of faith whole, at one with one another, and at one with God.

God has a need for us. And this need is what drives the universe. We belong to God. And this belonging is what drives the universe.

God will leave the 99 to find the lost one, knowing that maybe tomorrow God will be searching for a different “lost sheep” of the 100. God knows that the title of “The Lost Sheep” gets passed around the flock quite a bit. At one time or another, all the sheep will be considered “the Lost Sheep.” And God wants us to know that there are different degrees to being lost, even among the 99 left behind.

God wants us to change our perception. God wants us to see that our labels are misplaced. God knows that the 99 left behind are the human race as we think we are. And that the lost sheep is the human race as it really is.

God wants to offer to all of God’s children the possibility of a new start. God wants to offer to all a message of hope: you can always begin again.

When we hear this familiar story, we are reminded that we, the 99, are called to refocus our attention to what God is doing in our community. That we, the 99, are called to join in the celebration of finding the lost one because we are one step closer the coming of God’s kingdom, we are one step closer to the promise of peace and hope.

We are called to remember a time when we were lost that God relentlessly searched for us. Our God maybe still searching for us, even if we are a part of the 99 left behind. Our God is a caring and diligent God. And no matter how many times we get lost or to what degree of lost we are, our God will search for us. Our God will sweep away the dirt from our lives. Our God will light a lamp to drive out the darkness. Our God will rejoice each and every time our God claims us and brings us home. Our God is a searching God. And we are brought home: the 99 and the lost ones, God has called us all to the table. The respected teachers and the not so respected. The leaders and the followers. The high officials and the tax collectors.

There are no place cards that say the lost ones sit here and the 99 sit here. There are no assigned seats for those who have been in the fold the longest and for those who are new to the faith. All are welcome at God’s table.

God says welcome.

And we have been given the call to extend that welcome to all of God’s children. This is not a Sunday only welcome. When we say welcome, it is a welcome that is a relentless search for the lost that is fueled by a passion and caring God. Our welcome is that of a shepherd who will leave the 99 to go in search of the one, knowing full well, his search will not end when the one is returned to the flock. Each and every day, this shepherd will have to go out again in search of a different lost sheep, no matter how many times. Our God will search and will welcome us home. God’s welcome for us is driven by God’s need for us. God’s welcome for us is grounded in the fact that we belong to God.

All are welcome. You are welcome here. Amen.