

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
The Relentlessly Hopeful Shepherd
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Luke 15

Our gospel reading this morning begins with a short story, a little parable, that teaches something important about who God is. When you pay attention to little stories like these, the question is what does this story teach us about God? There's actually 2 stories here, a story about a shepherd who goes searching for a lost sheep, and a second story about a woman who searches everywhere for her lost coin. Both stories are about God.

God is like a shepherd. That's not just in this little story. Throughout scripture, God is pictured as a shepherd. You might know Psalm 23, The Lord is my shepherd. Jesus uses this image, too, calling himself the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep. In this story, the shepherd is in a pickle. He has a problem. He has 100 sheep in his flock. But one has gone missing. 99 are here, safe, with him. 1 is gone. What should he do?

The way Jesus poses the question, it's like it's obvious what we would do. Which one of you, he asks, if you had 100 sheep but lost one of them, does not leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after the one who's lost until you find it? God is like that too, Jesus says. God does the same with his people. God is like a good shepherd, which you all would be, if you were in the same situation.

Jesus seems to assume that this is typical behavior for a normal shepherd and a normal person. Of course, he says, a shepherd leaves his 99 in the wilderness and goes looking for the one.

But is that true about us? I don't know anything much about actual shepherds and shepherding and the occasional lost sheep, but I know something about people. People have to make hard decisions all the time about what they'll risk and what they'll gain, and what it may cost them.

The woman in the second story has herself a problem, too. What will she do—to what lengths will she go to find a lost coin? The shepherd knows what's at stake in leaving the 99 at risk while he searches. In searching for a coin, the woman is like anyone who has lost anything of value like that, who turns the house upside down searching, not knowing if she'll find it. You've been in this situation. You've lost a coin or the clicker or car keys or your social security card. You feel like you've lost your ever loving mind.

Both stories Jesus tells here say God is like this: God will do anything, anything, absolutely anything to search and save what is lost in the world.

From what I know of people, I know this: a person is absolutely committed only to that which and to those whom they love. Love makes all the difference in the world. Without love, a relationship is just a business transaction. In the parable, if you take love out of it, a lost sheep is

just 1% of the investment and potential profits. It's not nothing, but it's a rounding error in the monetization of the herd.

But with love, the shepherd demonstrates absolute commitment to finding the one who is lost. Can a shepherd really love the sheep? It looks like love. He goes after the one who is lost until he finds it. And when finding it, he doesn't chastise it or drive it or scold it, but lays it on his shoulders to carry it home.

That image right there, a shepherd not driving 100 sheep or 1000 sheep but tenderly carrying one on his shoulders, that's God. And that's you at some point in life, lost but now found, gathered up in the arms of God, carried to safety.

Is that how you picture God? The mental image some people carry of God is of a severe dictator or distant deity or a distant memory. But then there's this image, can you see it? Can you feel it? The shepherd carrying home a lost sheep was one of the first images that Christians painted in their sacred places like the catacombs. Even before the cross became the most recognizable sign of Christianity, a shepherd carrying home a lost sheep was how early Christians saw themselves and, more importantly, saw God. Because it's an image of love.

May it ever be the beating heart of the church, no matter what, to be like God, the good, loving, relentlessly hopeful shepherd.

The heart of children's and youth ministry is beating in the child in the room who feels like they don't belong and don't fit in and need someone to say, sit here, join in, you belong here.

The heart of the college ministry is beating in each student, not the masses of students herding together to activities, but the mind and heart of each one and the story that is unfolding in their life as they grow into the person that they are becoming.

The heart of the church's ministry in the community is beating in the life of the person who God has brought into our life. The hungry, the thirsty, the lonely, and this very day, the sojourner.

The heart of the church is the heart of God beating in all those who go with God anywhere it takes to be close to the love of God for the one lost sheep who's gotten a little lost... or a lot lost or has been driven from their home. You know what means everything to God? You do, the place within you that's lost, that's hurting, that's in need of redemption, the place that's in need of renewal. That place, that person means everything to God.

We are under the care of the good shepherd who knows us and knows when we are close by and knows when and where we have wandered. A people listening for the voice of the one who loves them—that's the church. People made who they are by the grace of God and held with one another by the mercy of God. If this story, really both of these stories teach us anything, it's this: if one is lost, the whole is diminished. When the shepherd has 100 sheep, that's not a random number in the story. When the shepherd has 100 sheep, that multiple of ten is the perfect

biblical number of completeness, of wholeness. When he loses one, the herd hasn't just been reduced by 1%; the whole has been diminished into something less than the whole.

The attention of God is on each one because each one matters; each one means everything. You mean everything. The person next to you means everything. That part of you that is committed to God means everything, and so does the part of your life that's wandered away to the brambles and weeds of the wilderness. That part of you means everything to your wholeness and everything to God.

God rejoices over you being made whole. God rejoices over you when you are lost and you are found, when you wander and when you come home, when you repent, and when you just want to repent and don't know where to begin. God rejoices over you when any part of your life that's not God's is restored to being with God and of God. This is a celebration in heaven.

These parables are parables of God's mercy. They are also parables of God's joy. God wanders over hill and valley looking for his lost lamb because God wants one more thing to celebrate. God sweeps and peeks and searches and turns the whole house, the whole world upside down looking for her lost coin.

God searches the world of our hearts to seek all within us that has wandered, to bring us back home. God is not resigned to your distance for who you are at the center of God's heart, you who do not yet know the beauty of his love, the astonishment of his mercy, you who have not yet welcomed Jesus into the center of your own life, you who are convinced you cannot get unentangled from the briar patch of your life choices, you who because of bad things that have happened in your life, have a hard time believing in love. You are precious in God's sight. God is roaming the whole world, relentlessly searching for you. You are irreplaceable. You have a place. It is you and no one can replace you no matter how many other sheep, no matter how many other coins, no matter how many other saints, voices, bodies, hands, minds. You are beloved. You are known. You are loved.

Because this is the God we know, this is the kind of story of God we can tell. To children and youth, to college students far from home, to those getting their lives together and those giving their lives away, those at the end of life, those in crisis, those in joy, and those who show up with nothing in their hands but a little hope and little in their past but pain.

Today's parables were inspired by some people who were criticizing Jesus. They sneered: "He welcomes sinners and eats with them." And Jesus, in effect says, "You don't like that? Well, here's more." The disdain actually turns out to be a wonderful announcement. *Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them.* Yeah. This is what happens in every service. Jesus welcomes us to his table, where he eats with us. It's a phrase we could write on the doors of the church, "Here Jesus welcomes sinners and invites them to his table." (Pope Francis)

And not only that, here Jesus welcomes doubters and invites them to his table. Here, Jesus welcomes hard hearts and invites them to his table. Here, Jesus welcomes broken hearts and

invites them to his table. Jesus welcomes those who are strangers to one another and invites them to come together to his table. No one is a stranger to him.

Here's the story of God our 1st graders will be reading about in their new Bibles: A feast was prepared, the wine was poured, many friends had come, a celebration ready to begin. Then God told the angels. Keep the table set. Keep watch over everyone. I've got to go. I'm leaving for a while but I'll be back, and I'm not coming back alone. I'm going searching for others. I'm not coming home without my beloved ones, whatever it takes, even if it kills me. I will find them.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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