

“That One Sheep”
By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Exodus 32.7-14
Luke 15.1-10
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A couple weeks ago I was trying to think of the name of a board game that I like to play. The name was on the tip of my tongue, and I asked Rob, “Hey, what is that game I like to play?” And his response was, “Where did you leave your keys?” In fairness to him, when I am looking for something I have lost, like my keys, which is nearly every day, I sing a funny sarcastic song that I made up that goes, “looking for my keys is my favorite game.” So, he wasn’t far off.

Rob will tell you that I lose something every day. Usually it’s my keys. Sometimes it’s an earring. Occasionally it’s my patience. If you’ve seen my desk you’ll know I can be messy, but messiness is a sign of creativity.

About two months ago I realized I couldn’t find my communion sets. I have two, one that I received at my ordination, and one that Rob gave me, that had sentimental value. I carefully looked over my shelves, thinking I must have unpacked it, and probably looked at it every day but became so used to it I had overlooked it. It wasn’t in my office. I unpacked the last box of books sitting in my closet, and didn’t find it there. I went home and tore the house apart, looking in obvious places, looking in the basement, and didn’t find it.

It wasn’t that I didn’t have communion ware. This church has beautiful communion sets, and through pandemic we learned that we can take communion out of a mason jar and off a napkin. But this set was important to me, and I was willing to search high and low for it.

In today’s gospel passage Jesus tells two parables that include losing something or someone. Before the parables are told the scene is set - people are grumbling, complaining, murmuring that Jesus is hanging out with sinners. These were people in the margins, who were not welcome in larger society. Jesus has gone out of his way to welcome them and let them know they belong. This has infuriated people. It’s outside their comfort zone. They are upset that God’s love is for everyone.

So Jesus tells these two stories. The first is about a shepherd who has 100 sheep and loses one. The shepherd leaves the other ninety-nine sheep, which is risky, and goes in search of the one lost sheep.¹ We don’t know how the sheep gets lost. It isn’t said in the story. We can assume it was distracted or just being a sheep. Yet, I think it might be important to reconsider when we begin to think about who that one sheep is in our world. If we remember the context of the passage, Jesus is “in trouble” for befriending those who were on the margins - those who would have been that one sheep. Though, I don’t think those “sheep” or those people on the margins were distracted and walked away - I think they were probably chased away in society. It could have looked subtle, or it could have been blatant. Those sheep are anyone excluded from society.

¹ Paul Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year C*. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1994), 409.

When Black Lives Matter became more mainstream in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd, this scripture was used to combat the phrase All Lives Matter. The only way all lives can matter is if those who have been pushed to the edge, the margins, the one who is lost, is included and embraced and belongs.

This week Presbyterian News Service released a wonderful article this week about a church in Nassau, New Jersey that embraced an Autistic parishioner. He and his mother began attending when he was in high school, and other congregations had not been as welcoming or patient when Danny, the son, did not stay quiet in services or follow what might be considered normative behavior for a traditional worship service. The community interacted with him and encouraged him to keep coming back. His mother said, “It takes a lot of effort to address the needs of just one individual.”²

Our world is set up to for the majority. In some ways it makes sense - this can be democracy at work. At the same time we have to ask who is excluded - who is the one person or group of people being excluded? What hinders them from participation? Sometimes setting up the world for the majority is simple - it's straight forward and takes less time. It takes time and energy and relationship building to go outside our comfort zones, but it is worth it.

The implication of something being lost is that someone has recognized that it is missing.³ We are not the shepherds. We might not even be the lost sheep. We might be those other 99 sheep needing to reflect on why other sheep have left the flock. God values all the sheep, but in that moment must focus on the one that is lost. What do we value? As individuals? As a community? As a congregation?

Again, these stories were told because there was a bit of gossip going around - the Pharisees and scribes were murmuring and questioning Jesus' method. We hear some murmurings and complaints in the Exodus passage, as well. The Israelites had been in the wilderness and are tired, maybe confused, and certainly frustrated. Moses was always taking the complaints and murmurings to God, who would respond.

I mentioned last week that at the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program we spent time talking about conflict. When we talked about Jesus' approach to conflict, a colleague of mine referenced that sometimes Jesus asked important questions to make people think and challenge their position, or he would flip tables. The struggle is knowing when to ask the questions, and when to flip the tables. That brings us to how do we bring the murmurings from the parking lot meetings to the whole community - not in an attempt to shame, but to address whatever the issue or concern might be.

² Presbyterian News Service, “The Many ways a New Jersey church has embraced a member with autism is the subject for a Matter of Faith” September 8, 2022, https://pres-outlook.org/2022/09/the-many-ways-a-new-jersey-church-has-embraced-a-member-with-autism-is-the-subject-for-a-matter-of-faith/?fbclid=IwAR1feqKSQagY_bYtW3dMKSzo6T631XAR2dc6N971zeVRAWvYUNo3ApWmcx8

³ Scott Bader-Saye, “Luke 15.1-10” in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 4.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 70.

Moses has brought the issues before God many times, God responds, and Moses tells the people. Now, God is furious because despite the communication that has happened, the people keep murmuring, and now they have built a golden calf to worship. God is ready to flip all the tables, but Moses calms God down. Moses pleads that God will change God's mind and God does! The part we don't read here is that Moses goes back down the mountain, sees exactly what God said he would see, and Moses then loses his cool and becomes frustrated, too.

God changed God's mind. If God can change God's mind, why do we humans stay so stuck in our own ways? The end of the Gospel passage reminds us that there is much rejoicing over one who has repented. It doesn't tell us who repents. My guess is it isn't the one sheep. My guess is that it is the one who has changed their mind. The idea of repentance in Greek is a turning around - changing one's mind and one's ways. When we do that, God rejoices.

May we never be so inflexible we stop caring for the one sheep. May we embrace God's love, for God loves all of us. Amen.