

Sheep R Us

Luke 15:1-10

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Many of you have seen the 30-second video on social media of the boy who, with great care and effort, manages to pull a sheep out of a narrow ditch by its hind leg. The sheep takes off, with high leaps that suggests pure freedom and happiness—and plunges right back into the ditch, headfirst.

I'm reminded of Jesus's words in Matthew 12:11: "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a ditch on the sabbath; will you not pull it out of the ditch?"

But what about when the sheep keeps falling into the ditch over and over again? It seems, some sheep seem to have a predisposition for getting lost or falling into ditches or causing harm to themselves.

Writer Andre Dubus remembers a year he and his family lived in a very old house in southern New Hampshire. It was a wonderful big, old house with a swimming pool in the back, sitting on seventy acres of land, most of it wooded. It had eight sheep and the owner let them have run of the whole place and asked only in return that they take care of the eight sheep. That was it.

"All we had to do about them," writes Dubus, "was make sure they didn't get through the fence, which finally meant that when they got through, we had to catch them and put them back in the pasture."

But the sheep got out over and over. Someone in the family would see the wayward sheep, sometimes one but often two or three or four, and they would let out a shout and everyone would run out and try to herd the sheep back into the pen. It never worked. Eventually, the family had to chase the sheep down, tackle them, and pick them up and put them over the fence and repair the hole.

Dubus hadn't had much experience with sheep until then. "When I was a boy," he writes,

*sheep had certain meanings: in the Western movies, sheep herders interfered with the hero's cattle; or the villain's ideas about his grazing rights interfered with the hero's struggle to raise his sheep. And Christ had called us his flock, his sheep; there were pictures of him holding a lamb in his arms. His face was tender and loving, and I grew up with a sense of those feelings, of being a source of them: we were sweet and lovable sheep. But after a few weeks in that New Hampshire house, I saw Christ's analogy meant something entirely different. We were stupid helpless brutes, and without constant watching we would foolishly destroy ourselves (Andre Dubus, *Broken Vessels*, "Out Like a Lamb," p. 4).*

In the land where Jesus grew up sheep were everywhere. In fact, long before he came along, sheep were the mainstay of the rural economy. Everyone in every village had some sheep. Maybe only a few, kept out back fenced, near the family garden. For others, raising large flocks of sheep, was the center of their livelihood. Throughout the Bible – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, Moses, and to the shepherd boy who became king, David, the prophet Ezekiel, on and on – sheep and shepherds were as common and plentiful as grains of sand on a dusty day. The same was true in Jesus' day.

So, in one way I'm not surprised Jesus told taught and told parables about shepherds and sheep. Furthermore, the Gospel according to John says Jesus himself is the Passover Lamb slaughtered so we might have salvation. Revelation says that Christ Jesus, the king of kings, the Alpha and Omega, the Lion of Judah is the Lamb who was slain. Yet, when thinking about it, I'm a little surprised that in parables like the ones today, Jesus sees us, we common creatures of God, human beings, as sheep and God as the shepherd, or as John says, looking at Jesus we see what good shepherds look like and act like and we see how God is like that. In the Bible, we human beings are the sheep, or as environmental writer Gary Paul Nabhan says, "Sheep are Us" (*Jesus for Farmers and Fishers*, p. 136). And God is the shepherd. But it is interesting to me that shepherds in the Bible, including during Jesus' day, though plentiful, were considered among the lowest occupations and were considered "unclean." They had to stay outside of the synagogue and certainly outside of the Temple until they had undergone the rituals of purification, which took time, and good shepherds who took care of their sheep did not have much time. To put it in our context, shepherds were not very good church attenders. They didn't have time and they were dirty both ritually and literally.

So what kind of God is this? This God is the Good Shepherd who gets down and dirty with us, where we live. But I wonder if Jesus the Good Shepherd who is with us, loses patience with the sheep of his flock? Like the sheep in the ditch and the ones in Andre Dubus' story, we keep getting out, getting lost, getting in trouble, hurting ourselves, and hurting others. Does Jesus get tired of going and looking for us time and time again?

Luke says tax-collectors and all sorts of sinners were coming to hear Jesus and the religious leaders started grumbling, “This fellow welcomes sinners and even eats with them.” “Well, well. Look who’s is showing up to hear this young Rabbi Jesus! There’s the casino owner, some ladies of the night, a couple of loan sharks, the local tax-collector who works for Rome. Jesus is not only shaking hands with them and welcoming them, he’s asking them to stay for potluck dinner.”

Jesus overhears their self-righteous grumbling and tells these parables: “A shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one gets lost. So he leaves the ninety-nine behind to seek that one lost sheep. When he finds it, he rejoices, puts it on his shoulders and carries it home.” Then Jesus adds, “There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous people.”

He goes on, “Again, God is a woman who has ten silver coins. One is missing, and she turns her house upside down to find it. When she finds it, she is so excited that she tells all her friends. I’m telling you there is great joy in heaven over one sinner who comes back to God.”

Notice that already Jesus is both teaching and challenging the religious leaders. God is a lowly and dirty shepherd, and even more controversial, God is a woman. Talk about shaking things up!

Of course, the third parable Jesus tells is the longest and most famous, the story of the lost son, known as the prodigal son. We won’t get into this parable today, but it too is about someone lost – a son, and a searching father.

Three parables about the lost and the found. Three parables about a strange seeking God. Three parables about the desperation of the searcher and the joy of the finder. What's going on here?

Three parables, but my focus this morning is on the first parable and the missing sheep, mainly because it is so much at the heart of this church. After all, our church sign/church logo is the shepherd's staff, and we have long testified that we are a church full of lost sheep who have been found and brought home.

But our testimony is also that we're also a flock of sheep who keep getting out, getting lost, and getting hurt. Covid hurt us. Not so much the acute stage during the first year or so, but the "hangover" or aftermath hit us hard. We're a scattered flock. We have a lot of lost sheep and many who are hurt.

When I was the 23-year-old pastor of the little country church in Central Texas, a man visited our church with his wife and two children. People were a bit wary of him and I didn't know why. I went to visit the family like I did everyone. I drove down a dirt road, which turned into a sandy road with just two ruts through the woods and pasture. My small car bottomed out, so I stopped and got out and walked another mile to get to their house and along the way fended off the half a dozen dogs using my "farm-dog" Bible – a Bible big enough to protect against farm dogs. Once I got to visiting with the man, I too found him strange. For example, when they came to church in their big old 1974 Oldsmobile 98, he would open the hood, the trunk, and all four doors and leave them open during church because he said it made the car run better. He wore eyeglasses with lens as thick as shoe leather and he'd have "spells" come over him when he didn't know who he was or where he was and without care, attention, and medication he would

eventually lose control and run through the pasture screaming. The family didn't know what to do but call the sheriff's department. A couple of deputies would come out and beat the fire out of him, load him into the back of their car and take him to the VA hospital in Marlin.

I found out he was a Korean War veteran with a steel plate in his head from the war. Once, when he was clear-headed and lucid, he told me how isolated he felt sometimes, cut off from everyone and everything, including himself. What I realize now, he was telling me what it was like to be a lost sheep. Disconnected and estranged from everyone, even himself. He suffered more than I realized. Listening to him I learned how much it hurt to hurt.

Writer Rebecca Solnit says that a friend of hers who was a wilderness rescue expert, told her that children are good at getting lost and being found, because "the key in survival is knowing you're lost." He went on, "They don't stray far, they curl up in some sheltered place at night, they know they need help" (*A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, p. 11).

My church member knew he was lost and knew what it felt like to be lost. He knew he needed help.

How many of us are lost and don't know it? True, we're here this morning, and that's a big step in the right direction. But part of salvation and wholeness is recognizing our own estrangement, disconnect, and isolation – from God, from each other, and from ourselves. And from God's wider creation.

I've read that most of the time sheep don't even know they're lost when they're lost. They're just grazing wherever there is good grass, and don't notice they've wandered outside the fold, until it's too late. They look up and discover they have no idea of where they are and only then begin to understand their danger.

Jesus tells us that the God we worship is a God who pays attention, notices who is missing. And then God searches until God finds the lost sheep no matter how many are lost and how many times we get out. God is not content to sit and wait until we get our lives together or we learn our lesson. God searches for each and every one of us, every day, all the time. And no matter who we are, God searches for us and brings us home.

My friend Larry Bethune was the pastor of the University Baptist Church in Austin for 30 years. He remembers back in the early 90's when the congregation gathered for a church conference to decide how they would respond to the Baptist General Convention of Texas General Board motion to kick them out because of the church's inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians. Larry said that during the meeting, "One of our newer gay congregants stood up with tears in his eyes and said, 'Why are you doing this? Why are you sacrificing a 90-year relationship you've had with Texas Baptists? I want to thank you for your sacrifice for us.'"

Larry said that one of their oldest deacons, a retired UT professor, who had been a member for over fifty years, stood and said, "You want to thank us? No, we must thank you. We have been missing you all these years because of our prejudices. We were not whole, and we did not know it. We were not complete until we welcomed you. Thank you for having the courage to come here and be yourselves to show us what we did not see and teach us what we did not know."

Notice what the old deacon was saying. It was not simply that God is inclusive so the church must be inclusive. Though that is true. What the old deacon knew is the same thing that the third century African bishop Cyprian knew when he said, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, - “Outside the church, there is no salvation.” I used to hear that phrase and detest it. But I learned that Cyprian was not talking about the church as an institution and not about some big organization down on the corner. He was talking about the church as community, as the body of the Living Christ. Church as the sheepfold. And without being in the fold, there is no salvation.

The word we most always translate as “salvation” can also be translated as “wholeness” and is related to the words “health” and “healing.” Here salvation has nothing to do with our usual concepts of going to heaven or going to hell. It has everything to do with us needing each other because we’re all in this together. It’s all of us or nothing.

The Good Shepherd looks for lost sheep because they are not whole and complete until they are in the sheepfold but furthermore – and this is important – none of us are whole and complete until all the sheep are brought in.

We are all incomplete. The difference is whether we know it or not. Therefore, that sign out front of our building and the logo on the top of our Order of Worship, is a reminder of our incompleteness and a reminder to always ask, “Who is missing? Who is not here who will help us all be whole and know God’s salvation? And why aren’t we seeking who we’ve lost?”



So hear this morning the great seventeenth century poet and preacher John Donne:

*No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.  
If a clod be washed away by the sea,  
Europe is the less.  
As well as if a promontory were.  
As well as if a manor of thy friend's  
Or of thine own were:  
Any man's death diminishes me,  
Because I am involved in mankind,  
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;  
It tolls for thee.*

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.