

Sermon Sunday 13 November 2022 Parable of the Lost Sheep

Luke 15:1-7

In this very short story, Jesus manages to give us two powerful messages – repentance and God’s commitment to caring for us. But first, let’s set the scene. The Pharisees were complaining that Jesus was keeping company with sinners. Now let’s be clear about this, the Pharisees were very harsh, not only in their judgment of sinners but whom they called sinners. It should be noted that they certainly didn’t see themselves as sinners, quite the contrary. To them, anyone who didn’t subscribe to their rather petty rules and regulations was a sinner.

What’s more, the punishment for sinners, as they saw it, was harsh. Rather than endorse Jesus’s view that, and I quote from the Gospel reading, *‘There will be joy in heaven over one sinner who repents,’* they believed that there will be joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God! They looked forward not to the saving of a sinner but to the destruction of the sinner.

This largely reflects the Jewish understanding of God. God is seen as wreaking punishment on those who did not comply with his ways. *‘Then the Sovereign Lord showed me another vision. I saw him preparing to punish his people with a great fire. The fire had burned up the depths of the sea and was devouring the entire land.’* Amos 7:4. This language and imagery is quite common in the Old Testament. Jesus gives us a different understanding of God, and this is reflected in this short passage.

This passage tells us a lot about Jesus. He was a man for the people. He was not interested in the Jewish pecking order structure of society. If he was here today leading our worship, I tend to think he would not be standing up front bedecked in robes but rather would be sitting down there, gathering us all around him, rather like a mother hen and her chicks. *‘How often have I wanted to gather you together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings.’* Luke 13:34. He would have special attention for those who didn’t consider themselves to be holy and good.

So first let’s look at the message of repentance. Bottom line, God does not give up on a sinner and when we acknowledge our wayward ways and return to the fold, he is absolutely delighted. Two points to note here. To get back into God’s good books, we have to repent, we have to declare and own our mistakes. Second point, then God can welcome us with open arms. Refusal to acknowledge our wrongdoings hinders our relationship with God. It is a block.

Repentance is a cleansing process. It is one of the reasons why water is regarded as being spiritual – it cleanses. Let me tell you a story.

In 1818 Ignaz Philip Semmelweis was born into a world of dying women. The finest hospitals lost one out of six mothers to the scourge of what was referred to as ‘childbed fever.’ A doctor’s daily routine began in the dissecting room where he performed autopsies. From there he made his way to the hospital to examine expectant mothers without ever pausing to wash his hands. Dr Semmelweis was the first man in history to associate such examinations with the resultant infection and death.

After eleven years and the delivery of 8,537 babies, Dr Semmelweis lost only 184 mothers. He spent much of his life lecturing and debating with his colleagues. He argued, *‘Puerperal fever is caused by decomposed material, conveyed to a wound. I have shown how it can be prevented. I have proved all that I have said. But while we talk, talk, talk, gentlemen, women are dying. I am not asking anything world-shaking. I am asking you only to wash, wash, wash your hands’*

When we wash our hands, we are cleaning away the impurities and grime of whatever we have been doing. Repentance works in the same way. It brings new life, just as Ignaz brought new life to those countless babies.

Let's now look at the message of God's commitment to caring for us. This message is captured in the image of the shepherd searching for the lost sheep. Shepherds had a tough row to hoe in those days. There were no fences to contain the sheep. Good pasture was often scarce, so the sheep were prone to wander as they searched for good grass. On top of that, there were wild animals to deal with. A good shepherd was committed to the welfare of his sheep and was prepared to make all sorts of sacrifices for them.

I think of all the images Jesus gives us of what both he and God mean to us, the image of the shepherd is the one that resonates with me. Let me tell you another story.

In 1997 the daughter of Alan Routley, Diana, a New Zealander, had gone missing while backpacking in India. She was an experienced traveller, who regularly kept in touch with her family back home in New Zealand. Diana was a bright and bubbly 26 year-old, who had flown from London to New Delhi, but had then failed to emerge from the ancient city of Varanasi.

Diana's disappearance spurred Alan into action. He had been successful in business and had a healthy bank balance. He told his other children that even if it took every last cent of their inheritance, he would keep looking until he found their sister. Alan tried desperately to get information out of India but to no avail, and so he went to India himself. He took hundreds of posters with Diana's photo and details on them, printed in Hindi and English, which he intended to put up in hotels and hostels.

He made two trips to India, scouring the narrow alleyways on 40 degree heat, wandered along the banks of the Ganges River, and pestered local police for any news of Diana. The final outcome was tragic. The police found her remains, buried in a crude grave under a house where she had been murdered by greedy men who had stolen her travellers cheques.

What strikes me about this story is the commitment of Diana's father, Alan, to find her, to be prepared to sacrifice everything he has and go to the ends of the earth to find her.

Our heavenly Father has billions of 'missing children'. He has sent his good shepherd, Jesus, to find us and bring us back into the fold. This has to be the central truth of the Christian message. We wander from the pathway, every single one of us, but God wants to have a relationship with him. That relationship is made possible, firstly through our acknowledgment of our humanness, and secondly, through God's love as manifested in Jesus Christ. Jesus personifies that love and he provides the link, the bridge with us and God. He makes God accessible. The more I think about it, the more I believe that really does sum up the role of Jesus. He makes God accessible.

I sometimes make the point that invariably we remember just one point from the sermon each week. Well, today, I challenge you to remember two points – God is committed to each of us and Jesus makes God accessible for us.

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