

October 23rd, 2016

You Are Loved (Luke 16:1-7. Intergenerational Service)

Our message today is another one of Jesus' parables – and it is a bit interactive today. I'm going to need some help from all of you. First I have a question for you – put your hand up if you have ever lost something special and important to you? (maybe ask what they lost). And when you realized that it was lost, did it make you feel sad, perhaps worried, maybe even frantic? And I bet you searched everywhere for it! Am I right?

Well I remember when our son Gavin was just little, about 5 years old. He was always a nightmare to take shopping because he would like to hide under the racks of clothes, or run around to the next aisle in the supermarket to jump out and surprise me. I used to look enviously at the parents that had little girls that obediently walked along beside them in the store! Then one day when we were shopping, I looked around for him and I couldn't find him. I called his name again and again, thinking he was just hiding, but he didn't answer. I began to get frantic; I looked under all the racks of clothes, ran to the next aisle, checked out the Toy aisle where I was sure he would be, and all the time my voice was getting more and more anxious. Soon I had others in the store looking for him too, and when I went to customer service, they put an announcement over the speaker saying "Gavin if you are in the store, please come to find Mummy at the front door." By now, my heart was racing and there were tears in my eyes. It seemed like an eternity, but in fact it was less than 15 minutes later when I finally found him waiting at the car in the parking lot. He had been worried because he thought he'd lost me too, so he'd gone back to the car to find me. When I saw him, I threw my arms around him, told him how much I loved him, that I was so happy that I had found him, and told him "not to tell Daddy!"

If you adults have ever lost a child, just for a moment, then you will understand the joy that comes over you when you find them again. Your love for that child overwhelms any urge to scold them. You forgive them instantly! Am I right? (response). And if you children have ever been lost, and then found by your parents, you know how good it feels to know that someone loves you enough to never stop looking for you. Am I right? (response). And that is what the message is in our story today. Jesus uses a parable to tell his listeners how God never stops looking for someone who is lost, and how happy God is when he finds them.

It isn't difficult for us to realize that Jesus is the Shepherd in the story. Just as the Shepherd goes out and looks for the lost sheep until he finds it, Jesus also goes and seeks out the people who are "lost". But you might not have realized how Jesus the shepherd is also a fulfillment of a prophecy from the Old Testament. The prophet Ezekiel warns the leaders of Israel that they were not being good shepherds of the people. They weren't taking good care of them! In Ezekiel 34, verse 2, Ezekiel says:

"Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?"

What do you think? Is a shepherd there to look after himself, or to look after the sheep? (response)
Then Ezekiel tells them off for letting the sheep go astray and not caring about them. In verse 6 he says:

“My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no-one searched or looked for them!”

They don't sound like very good shepherds! In fact, Ezekiel tells us that Israel's leaders were so bad, that he tells them that God himself will take their place in looking for his lost sheep. Ezekiel 34: 11- 16:

“The Lord God says, I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so I will look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all places where they are scattered I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.”

So when Jesus tells the story of the Lost Sheep, it is not just a nice little fable about lost sheep; Jesus tells it deliberately to remind his listeners, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, that the ancient scriptures say that God will be sending a Shepherd – and who do you think that shepherd is??? (Jesus!)

Now, we have often heard Jesus referred to as “the Good Shepperd.” So, if this story is about Jesus as the Shepherd - What kind of shepherd is described in this story? Well, let's look at some of his qualities.

First there is the fact that the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine-other sheep to go after the lost one. Now that always seemed a little reckless to me. Why would you put the lives of 99 other sheep in danger – leaving them out in the open where they are open to attack by wolves, coyotes or whatever. Why would you risk the wellbeing of the entire flock to find one? It seems like bad shepherding to me! But in fact, when the 99 were together, they would be less likely to be attacked than the lonely 1; when separated from the flock, that 1 would be more of an easy target for predators. And if you don't believe me, just watch a Discovery program on TV about how a lioness always singles out the weakest animal that has wandered away from the herd. So, leaving 99 to go after 1, is not really bad shepherding. It seems, in fact that the shepherd knew who would be in danger the most. And that is a bit like us – when we stay together as believers, like a flock of sheep, we get comfort, support and safety from everyone else in our church family– but when we wander off on our own, then it can be a bit more dangerous and we can get more easily influenced and hurt by other things in the world.

Secondly, I think the story shows us that the shepherd knew his sheep very well. He must have counted every single one to know that there was one missing. According to Larry the Lamb, the shepherd even had names for all his sheep. He recognized each one of them, and called them by name. And that is how it is with God too. The story emphasizes that 1 got lost, because that is how God counts as well. Each 1 of us is important to God. We are each special and unique. And God wants to call each of us by name. God wants to have a relationship with each one of us.

Then in the story there is the shepherd's perseverance. He searches and searches “*until he finds it.*” The shepherd does not give up easily – just like God does not give up wanting to be in a relationship with each of us. Now we might now actually get lost, but we might wander away from God sometimes, stop coming to church, stop reading the bible, stop praying, and maybe other things might become more important to us than God, like partying, drinking, gambling, or maybe hockey, TV, video games!

But, God does still not stop searching for us. God does not stop loving us. Like the shepherd, God perseveres.

And I think that the shepherd is caring too. When he finds that one lost lamb, he very lovingly carries him on his shoulders. He could have just pushed him along with his shepherd stick, but instead he lifts him up and carries him. I expect that the little lost lamb was very scared – at least that’s what Larry the lamb said. And probably the warmth of the shepherd’s body and the smell of the shepherd made the lost lamb feel safe. And that’s what it’s like with God. When we feel lost and scared, and when we ask God to find us, then we can also feel comforted by God; it’s like being wrapped in a parents arms. Like the shepherd, God cares for us.

And at the end of the story we see how the shepherd is so happy when he finds the one lost sheep. In fact, he is so happy, that he excitedly tells all his neighbors and friends to come and celebrate with him. He doesn’t keep the joy to himself, instead his joy spills out to others and becomes a big party. And Jesus tells us that God is also happy when one person who has been lost, who has strayed away from God, is found again and brought back into the church family. God does not punish us for not doing the right things. Instead, he is happy and accepts us when we come back to God and say ‘yes’ we want to be with you.

So, let’s recap. You tell me with a big ‘Yes’, or thumbs up, or nod, if you think Jesus has the same qualities as the shepherd:

1. Knows where it is safe and where it is dangerous.
2. Knows his sheep all individually
3. Perseveres and doesn’t give up looking when a lamb gets lost
4. Is very caring towards his sheep
5. Is happy when he finds one that was lost.

I don’t know about you, but I think that this story tells us that the Shepherd must have loved his sheep very, very, much. And I know for sure, that, like the Shepherd, God loves us very, very much.

A Lamb's Story (children's story – told with a puppet)

Hi my name is Larry. Larry the lamb! The shepherd gave me that name – he gives all of us names. There's 100 of us in my flock, and he knows all us by name. But he especially knows my name because I'm often getting in trouble. It's not that I'm very naughty, it's just that I like to wander off sometimes. I don't mean to, I'm just curious, that's all.

Like the other day. We all grazing, eating some grass on the plain, and I could see that there were some rocks in the distance. I'd never seen those rocks before. They looked beautiful the way the sun was glittering on them. I began to wonder what might be behind the rocks; perhaps the grass was even greener there, and juicier. So, when the shepherd wasn't looking, I quickly skipped towards the rocks. I guess I knew it wouldn't be very safe for me to be on my own, but I didn't think I would be very long. I figured I could run back and be with the others if anything happened. I was so curious, that I skipped along and didn't even hear the "mah mah mah" sound of the other sheep. Or, maybe I did, but I ignored them. I quickly darted behind the rock, and began to climb up ... and that's when I got stuck! My little hoof got stuck in a crevice between the rocks. I tried to pull it out, but it wouldn't come. I was stuck. I didn't want to call out to the shepherd because I knew that I shouldn't have wandered off. I thought he would be cross with me. So I just lay there. But after a while I began to feel cold, and hungry. The rocks didn't look so good when the sun wasn't shining on them. They weren't much fun. And I began to wish that I was just back with all the others.

I don't know how long I had been there. It seemed like ages, when I heard him call my name. "Larry! Larry! Larry!" He was looking for me! I couldn't believe it. I began to cry out "mah mah mah" – and the shepherd kept calling my name. "Larry". He didn't give up looking for me, even though it was beginning to get dark.

I don't know how long it took before he found me, but he did, he carefully bent down and got my leg out of the crevice. I thought he would tell me off – maybe hit me with his big stick, but instead, he picked me up in his big strong arms and nuzzled his face into my fur. He was happy that he had found me. And I was happy too. I licked his face with my wet tongue. And he didn't make me walk back either, he carried me all the way back. I could smell his human smell, and feel his strong arms. I felt so safe! And felt so loved!

I don't know quite what the other 99 thought when I came back. I expect that there were some of them who were jealous of me, and I am sure that some thought that I should have been punished. But most of them were very happy to see me again, and they skipped around bleating and dancing because I had been found.

Anyway, that's my story, and that is how I know that the Shepherd loves me.