

THE LOST SHEEP

Easter is over and gone, at least for many people – at least for another year. The Easter crowds have come and gone. The people who do not really need or want Jesus will leave us alone for another year. I used to resent it a little. Then I felt sad about it for a while. But it is what it is, and mostly a favor to those who really want to be faithful. So now we have a chance to calm down and ponder simpler things.

Jesus tells us stories. Our usual term is “parables.” Disarming at first, perhaps, but they are also windows into how Jesus thinks, and in time we realize they carry the seeds of His real Gospel to us.

One of the most famous stories in the Bible is called the “Parable of the Prodigal Son.” That is what *we* call it, but that is not what Jesus called it. Nor does this title appear anywhere in the New Testament. I am probably going to ruin this story for some of you, so let’s be clear at the outset: parables can have more than one meaning and more than one application. Preaching is a lot like dipping your finger into a bucket of water. As soon as you withdraw your finger, it is as if nothing has happened – nothing is changed. So by the end of this worship service, you can go right back to where you were before it began, and the Parable of the Prodigal Son can mean exactly what it has always meant to you. So there is nothing to worry about.

Meanwhile, some of us also want to know what Jesus was trying to tell us. Sometimes that is quite different from what we think He *should have* been saying to us.

The fifteenth chapter of Luke begins with the tax-collectors and sinners crowding around to listen to Jesus. But the Pharisees and scribes object and complain. They say that no true religious leader should be this friendly with sinners – even eating with them. Verse three expressly states that Jesus is answering the Pharisees and scribes with these parables. Who is Jesus talking to? The Pharisees and scribes. So these parables are not crafted to comfort the tax-collectors and sinners. They are *aimed* at the Pharisees and scribes.

No matter how powerful and meaningful it is to hear these parables if you are a repentant sinner – no matter how much we may love to be told that we can come home from our “far countries” – the sledgehammer behind these stories is aimed at the self-righteous;

the people who do not think they need to repent; the people who are not ready to welcome others into the Kingdom. We know that. We have heard it before. But if it has sunk in as deeply as we pretend, why do we keep changing it back around? Why do we still get caught in thinking patterns that do not match what Jesus is telling us?

This is not the Parable of the Prodigal Son. That is the title we have tacked on to it; it helps us to miss the real message. This is the Parable of the Elder Brother. The Pharisees and scribes are not going to identify with the Prodigal Son. They are going to be as angry toward him as the Elder Brother is in this parable. They are in the role of the Elder Brother, who is angry and resentful that the FATHER is welcoming the Younger Brother back to the Farm – this irresponsible, immoral wastrel who comes skipping back home without a penny to his name, after having blown a full third of what the entire family estate was worth. How many years will it take to build the Farm back up to the level of security and prosperity it enjoyed before this little shit-head took off with his share of the inheritance? Killing the fatted calf indeed; somebody should have kicked his teeth in!

Of course, behind the outer level of the parable, the Pharisees and scribes are angry toward those who are not helping to keep the Covenant. Like the Younger Brother, they keep breaking the precepts that all of Israel has sworn to keep. And the result is that God keeps withholding the promises that were made to Israel if it kept the Covenant, and God keeps bringing the curses that were promised if Israel did *not* keep the Covenant. This is not just a tweety-tweet level of “Let’s everybody be more loving and forgiving.” Israel has been getting beat up, enslaved, slaughtered, and destroyed for a thousand years. Things have been going downhill ever since King David. Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and now the Romans have been riding roughshod over Israel – over the destiny of the Chosen People. And either there is no God, or it is because God’s people have not kept the Covenant like they promised to.

Then along comes this upstart carpenter with no credentials, and He is saying, “Forget the Old Covenant! It is not about keeping the Old Covenant. We are switching to a New Covenant. Invite and accept people into the Kingdom on a new basis. God already loves his children. Trust this New Covenant of a relationship of forgiveness, grace, and mercy between God and all of us – even tax-collectors and sinners.”

THE LOST SHEEP

A lost sheep, a lost coin, a lost son – and we think they are just pleasant little stories? Do we not notice the challenge to everything Judaism has ever believed? What kind of peace or harmony can there ever be in a world that no longer honors the Ten Commandments? In a world that is abandoning the Old Covenant for some untried, untested New Covenant? The Elder Brother is the only sane character in the story. And he hates his brother. What kind of “Brave New World” can we get if we are moving into chaos and contradictions like that? We love God and we will keep God’s commandments, but it’s back to Cain and Abel?

* * *

Maybe we should back up to the lost sheep. That might be easier than the dynamic between these two brothers. “*More rejoicing*” – we are told – “*greater joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent.*”

It is important to notice that Jesus does not preach, teach, or practice a forgiveness apart from repentance. We must repent – turn and head in a new direction – or there is no New Life for us. We cannot go on running our own lives, and everybody else’s, without ending up down a blind alley – down a dead-end street. We are hearing a lot of fuzzy and sentimentalized nonsense today about how everybody should forgive everybody no matter what. And it is implied, or stated outright, that this is what Jesus is showing and telling us. But that is not the truth. Jesus says: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” “*If your brother repents, forgive him.*” And here in this parable, the lost sheep is equated with a sinner who repents.

Some people try to see the Younger Brother as someone who has not repented. That makes it easier to explain the attitude of the Elder Brother. But that does not go with the story. The Younger Brother “comes to himself” – he heads for home. To repent means to head in a new direction. The Younger Brother has no pride left; he knows he is not worthy to be considered a true son. He hopes only to be given the status of a hired servant, and he is not at all certain about even that. Repentance is clearly part of these stories.

THE LOST SHEEP

But some of us still have trouble with the favor shown to the lost sheep. Why does Heaven rejoice over one lost sheep more than over us good-living, responsible church members who stay in the fold – stay in the church – and work really hard to help our Lord build the Kingdom?

Jesus is constantly setting these “tender traps.” He simply does not believe it the way we try to see it. There is no flock of sheep too good to need a Savior. There are no sheep who do not need to be “found.” *“All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”* If we are the “well” who have no need of a physician, then Jesus has no business with us. If that is our condition, we cannot hear Him or learn from Him anyway; there is no chance for us to become *followers*. We are too busy “running His Church for Him” to pay any attention to His truth or His purposes or His instructions or His guidance.

Would it be nice to be in a church where none of the sheep have ever strayed? Where all of the members have always been good and righteous and true? Why be out looking for the lost? They wouldn’t fit in here very well anyway. Why doesn’t Heaven rejoice over us “good guys”? Because the “good guys” are a figment of human imagination – a product of denial. The ninety-nine who do not need to repent do not exist; they never have. Jesus does not tell us fairy stories; we are the ones who build Disneyland.

There is no such thing in Christendom as the parable of the sheep who do not need to be found. So none of us have to worry; Heaven will rejoice over us too – whenever we truly repent.

* * *

The Elder Brother is the most lost person in the parable. He does not really love the Farm. He does not have true gratitude or appreciation for his Father. He has neither love nor compassion for his brother. That brings us face-to-face with one of the most difficult and perilous parts of the New Testament. How can we understand and deal with Jesus’ attitude toward the Pharisees and scribes who resented Him for receiving sinners? What are we to think and do with regard to the Elder Brothers in the flock – those who have never admitted any lostness and have therefore never felt “found,” forgiven, or loved for who they really are? How do we respond to those who resent it when the lost are brought into the flock, and who get angry at the shepherd or His followers if they go searching for more lost sheep?

THE LOST SHEEP

Surely in the most profound sense, such sheep are the most lost of all. Yet they are not out in the wilderness. They are well-fed, sleek-coated, and right in the middle of the flock. In fact, they are often the biggest and fattest sheep in the flock because they do not waste their energies or their resources out searching for the lost. Nor do they waste much energy welcoming the lost when they are brought home to the flock.

The answer Jesus gave for the lost was to find them, carry them home, and put them back among the flock, where they could be received and loved until they *felt* found and could take up their lives again as true members of the flock.

But what can be done with those who have never realized their lostness? You can welcome the Prodigal Son home, but what do you do with the Elder Brother who has never been away from home and who, for that very reason, does not have the faintest notion about what “home” really means or what its value is? The more the flock gathers around these unlost lost, the more they like it, the more they take pride in it, and the less they are willing to share the attention and affection with any other sheep. They mistake the love for something they deserve, and then they feel they have a right to it. And then they protect that right by turning against the undeserving. After all, attention and appreciation are in short supply, so such things need to be hoarded and guarded and kept for one’s self. Like the Elder Brother in the parable: never having been loved as the lost, they do not have the faintest notion about what love really means.

Such sheep undo all the Shepherd’s work. In some instances, it is even recorded that they get together and kill the Shepherd so that the flock will give them more time and attention. And sometimes the whole flock feels relieved to be out from under the Shepherd’s care, which keeps putting demands on their time and resources. A great relief – until the wolves come.

But the question is: What is the Christian attitude toward the lost who have never strayed and have never seen themselves as the lost? Jesus treated such sheep in a distinctly different way. On the surface it even seems like He *reversed* the principles of love that He Himself taught. On a deeper level, we suspect He was only *applying* these principles, but we do not see that or notice how that could be. In any case:

THE LOST SHEEP

1.) Jesus sent such people away to get really lost so they could really be found. That is, Jesus rejected those who thought themselves already found. He refused to receive the self-righteous who were certain that they deserved to be received. This outraged them. Jesus hoped the outrage would eventually cause them to see their real lostness – until they *could* be found.

2.) Some of the unlost lost never did get at all interested in Jesus' Message or mission. They simply opposed Him from the beginning. *"He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters."*

Such people Jesus condemned harshly, publicly, and in no uncertain terms. And when we hit those passages, some think "This could not be Jesus." He pointed out that they were destroyers of the flock; the enemies of God and God's purposes; wolves in sheep's clothing – black-hearted and foul of soul. Oh yes, Jesus said all those things about the Pharisees. A few of them may have heard and recognized the truth of what He said. But most, of course, did not. The self-righteous do not want the NEW righteousness of God's undeserved mercy and love. So they just get more and more self-righteous – and more and more angry.

I doubt if Jesus expected a positive reaction from most of them. But He could not accept them like He did the sinners because they already accepted themselves and assumed they deserved God's favor and approval. Jesus's love, in such circumstances, could only have been misinterpreted as more approval. In the case of the unlost lost, that would only make their chances of being found even more remote. So Jesus did the next best thing: He tried to save the other sheep from their clutches by revealing them for what they really were.

3.) Even so, Jesus was setting up the unlost lost for the one thing that might possibly save them. He told the truth He knew they could not stand, and then He allowed them to vent their anger by killing Him. That was His last hope for them. If they could see and admit that they had shed innocent blood, maybe that would break the stalemate – the cloak of denial. Perhaps then they could recognize the true nature of their self-righteous anger and opposition. If so, then they could be found. Behind His condemnation, the real and deeper motivation: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."* God of love indeed! But real love is never cheap.

THE LOST SHEEP

You can always tell when a lost sheep has really been found. You know them by their fruits, as Jesus told us. They are always out seeking the lost or home receiving the lost. But when an unlost lost sheep realizes that he has shed innocent blood – when he gets really lost and really found – then that is something else again. Then you get a Damascus Road ... and an Apostle Paul. Yes, the Apostle Paul was the epitome of the Elder Brother type – the unlost lost – until the light on the Damascus Road – the light of the Resurrected One – stabbed deep into his soul.

And for many of *us*, it has to be that – or nothing.