

SERMON – 11 September 2016

Luke 15 : 1 – 7

Romans 10 : 1 – 15

The parable of the lost sheep is one of the best known of the stories Jesus told. Many stained glass windows are devoted to pictures of Jesus releasing a sheep trapped in a thornbush or walking along smiling with a lamb draped over his shoulders.

“Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep!”

There are many people in our world today ensnared in thorn bushes, trapped in lives gone wrong, feeling helpless and hopeless and lost. Jesus said “I have found my lost sheep” not the lost sheep or a lost sheep or any old lost sheep, but my lost sheep. All those who have gone astray and are lost are children of God, they belong to him. In Matthew’s version of the story it says “Your father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”

This story presented a huge challenge to those listening to Jesus. The religious leaders, the righteous people, did not seek out the sinners and the lost. On the contrary, they went out of their way to avoid them and would have nothing to do with them. They were unclean. If they mixed with sinners they would have to cleanse themselves before going to the temple.

The religious leaders would discuss matters of God and the Law at meals, meals which could go on for hours. A person's standing in the community would be seen by the people he invited to his table – and there would be no sinners, only the in-crowd.

Here in our reading Jesus is sitting around the table with the religious leaders and with lots of other people who would have been considered unclean, untouchable, beyond the pale, the kind of people that Luke’s gospel frequently points out are included in the kingdom of God. Jesus has obviously invited them in – and it is hard to imagine just how shocking that was for the good righteous people.

And Jesus first story is about a shepherd – this too was a challenge. In Jesus day, the first century, the Jews were no longer a nomadic people, moving around and living in tents. They had settled into urban life and shepherds had become marginalised and despised. They were seen in the same light as tax collectors and sinners and even robbers.

His second story was about a woman sweeping the dirt on her kitchen floor looking for a lost coin. It was a coin worth about one day's wages, not much to some, a lot of money to others. Women were not held in high esteem in Jesus' day either. Using the example of a lowly woman sweeping her floor to illustrate the kingdom of heaven would also have been a surprise, something of a cultural shock.

There would have been a silence when he stopped speaking. Jesus would have looked around the table at the faces staring at him and seen two distinct reactions.

Some faces would harden and grow cold. In their faces and in their hearts, and soon in their words and their scheming - they would say No No No! The Pharisees knew the Old Testament scriptures and they knew Ezekiel 34 and they knew that Jesus was claiming right here to be the long-awaited Messiah of God.

This is our second reading for today but I wanted to read it here and not earlier. Ezekiel 34 - These verses were a wake up call to the people of Israel and have remained a wake up call to the Christian church throughout the ages.

Ezekiel says -

34 The word of the Lord came to me: 2 'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? 3 You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. 4 You have not strengthened the weak or healed those who are ill or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. 5 So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the

wild animals. 6 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.

7 “Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 8 as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, 9 therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: 10 this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

11 “For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12 As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

15 I myself will tend my sheep and make them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. 16 I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

22 I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. 23 I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. 24 I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken.

People reading the lost sheep parable in Luke often see it as Jesus challenging the Pharisees because they do not go out and seek the sinners and the lost and that is true. But it is also equally significant that Jesus is throwing down the gauntlet, he is saying “I am the Messiah, the chosen one born of the line of David, I am the Son of God.”

And so the faces and the hearts of the Pharisees around the table hardened and resisted and determined to destroy Jesus, to wipe the good shepherd from the face of the earth.

Perhaps Jesus' eyes filled with tears at seeing their reaction because after all, they were the very ones he had come to save. But Jesus knew that their arrogance and self interest and pride would prevent them from hearing him. He would not be lifting them on his shoulders and carrying them home.

If some round the table thought Jesus' words were terrible, others thought they were glorious words!

They have heard the Pharisees muttering "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" in a tone of disgust and disapproval. Did they look at one another and feel anxious, upset, want to slip away quietly. And then Jesus tells the stories of shepherds looking for lost sheep and a woman looking for a lost coin and they realise that the joyful celebration of the shepherd and the woman is like the joyful celebration of heaven over one of these repentent sinners who is eating with me at this table, one of them!

I read these words about this scene -

And on some of their faces now Jesus sees the light of worship rising. We hear you. You are the love of God seeking and finding what belongs to God. You are the heart of God. You are the arm of God reaching out. You are the crook of the Shepherd's staff in the wilderness. You are the shoulders of God where the sheep gets carried home. You are the lamp in the woman's house. You are the broom with its bristles in the dirt. And this meal right now, where you receive sinners and eat with us, this is the party, isn't it? Or, at least, the beginning of the party. And in your receiving us, God is receiving us. And in your joy we see what God is like. He is happy that we have come home. We have seen him. We have seen the Father.

MP 33 And can it be – a hymn that speaks of how amazing it is that Jesus came to die for sinners – my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth and followed thee (omit verse 2).

Two kinds of faces in a pluralistic world today where Jesus says—with parable and actions—"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). On the one hand, the face of anger and arrogance and rejection and ridicule. On the other hand, the face of

acceptance and repentance and worship and commitment. Which is your face?

The story is also a challenge to us today.

Some time ago God gave me a picture of the church through a sheep I came across when I was out walking. I shared it here a few years ago and I want to use the illustration again. I was walking up a lane towards a hill in Ratho and passed a field of sheep. Most were grazing but my eye was caught by one sheep that seemed to be resting and dozing in the sun. It was lying down with its head upright, leaning against a grassy bank. When I returned from my walk almost two hours later it was sitting in exactly the same spot, it hadn't moved at all – which seemed quite odd. I went into the field and over to the sheep which still didn't move – because it was stone dead! It must have settled down for a rest in the sun and it had died and because it was leaning against the slope, it had not fallen over, it was still upright. I called my friend the farmer and he came and removed it later in the day.

As I thought about that sheep I believe that God gave me a picture of church. I saw rows of people sitting in pews, looking as if they were participating in worship, sometimes standing to sing and then sitting down again, praying, giving every appearance of being a Christian congregation – but they were all dead, spiritually dead! They had heard the good news of the gospel message, some had even given their lives to Jesus, they had accepted salvation – but they were not bearing any fruit at all, they were not seeking the lost to share this wonderful gift that Jesus had given to them.

Just as that dead sheep was of no use to the farmer and had to be destroyed, so the people in this church that God showed me were no earthly use to God because they were not working for his kingdom, they had no interest in seeking out the lost sheep and picking them up and bringing them home.

Now I have been in many churches over the past few years and have not yet been in a church full of dead sheep, spiritually or otherwise. But this encounter with the sheep was over sixteen years ago and I have never forgotten the picture that it gave me of how church could become barren and inward looking and unwelcoming....and of how Christians can become

so focused on their own personal faith and development that they forget that they are meant to be making a difference in the world by reaching out.

Romans 10 speaks very clearly about this. Jesus is seen as the Lord of all, both Jews and Gentiles. At verse 13 we read “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching the good news to them. And how can they preach unless they are sent? How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” (from Isaiah 52).

In other words, if we do not follow Jesus’ example to reach the lost sheep, they will not hear the good news and so they will not believe and so they will not be saved – and it will be our fault. What a responsibility!

And it isn’t just about going out to seek, sometimes seekers appear in the church if they are brave enough! Lost sheep wander in through the church door looking for Jesus even although they might not know that. Are we warm and welcoming? If they are dressed satisfactorily and polite enough and seem to be quite like us, it is easy to be nice to them. What if they are not so presentable and don’t seem to fit in or behave as we would expect, what then?

James 2: 3 (from the Message) If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit, “Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!” and either ignore the street person or say, “Better sit here in the back row,” haven’t you segregated God’s children and proved that you are judges who can’t be trusted?

A minister retired recently after nearly 40 years in several parishes. He wrote about some the memorable and often funny moments in his ministry. For example, he said –

The best comment made to me after a sermon – “Utter madness”

The best question before a baptism – “Do you mind if I take the vows and don’t mean them?”

The quickest response to a question intended to catch me out – “Minister, you said in your sermon you like whisky. Does the bible not warn against strong drink?”

Me – “Yes it does.” The trap is set.

Woman – “Is whisky not a strong drink?” My escape – “Not to me it isn’t!”

The most unusual re-telling of the story of Jesus by a five year old “Jesus was good but they killed him.” That’s right” I said encouragingly. “Do you know how they killed him?” “Yes, they pushed him off the Empire State Building.”

And the one most relevant to our service today – The most welcoming comment from a Session Clerk to a newcomer – “Clear off! We don’t want the likes of you here!”

God is speaking directly to us in this parable. Many of us are within the 99 sheep that were left to their own devices. He has already sought us out, freed us from the chains that held us, carried us home to join the flock. And he is reminding us that there are lost sheep still out there.

Interestingly we might, in one sense, be a flock without a shepherd if Andre is elected by Balerno Parish Church this morning to be their minister. And yet that is not really true. The Pope is the head of the Catholic Church, the queen is the head of the Church of England but the Moderator is not the head of the Church of Scotland. The Church of Scotland declares that Jesus is its head. Ministers, elders and members acknowledge Jesus as head and Jesus’ Holy Spirit guides and protects all the flocks within the church. No flock is ever without its shepherd.

Many churches have no full time ministers, they are in vacancies. Some have been in vacancies for years. There are around 21 churches in West Lothian presbytery and almost one third are in some kind of vacancy and have no minister in post. In some ways, we will be like the 99, saved but left in the open pasture, left in God’s care, left in the care of the holy spirit. And so with the help of the Holy Spirit we will continue to seek the lost, welcome the stranger, rejoice over the saved, support one another.

The woman swept her floor with her broom looking for her precious coin. We know the saying “A new broom sweeps clean” meaning that a new person coming into an organisation will often make sweeping changes and do new things. But let us not sit around in the coming months waiting for the new broom, let us continue to sweep and search and persevere and reach out and grow. There are many talented people in this congregation with great gifts to offer and so it can be a time of confidence, listening to God and continuing to “be Church” in every sense in this place.

When Jesus walked on this earth, he loved the lost, Jesus cared, Jesus touched, Jesus healed, Jesus wept, Jesus held, Jesus forgave, Jesus saved. We will continue to do what Jesus did.