

The Lost Sheep

Luke 15: 1-7

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Years ago we had a dog named Zachery. He was a fifty-fifty mixture of Black Lab and German Shepherd. Zach was one smart dog. When you gave him a command he'd turn his head just a little to one side and look up at you as if he understood everything you were saying. Sometimes, I think he actually did understand what I was saying. He was also good at figuring things out. Watching us turn on the outside faucet to water the grass, he decided he could do the same thing. So every now and then he would turn on the faucet using his teeth when he wanted a fresh drink of water. Unfortunately, he wasn't so good at turning the faucet off when he was finished. One day he ran away. He dug under our fence and escaped. When Joy, our daughter, arrived home from high school she was devastated. We hopped in the car and drove through the neighboring communities looking for Zach. Finally as it was growing dark, we returned home. No Zachery. Sitting in the car, we prayed, "O Lord, please take care of Zach. Help him to find a really nice place where he will be safe until we can find him." The next morning we received a telephone call. Zachery had been found. A gentleman had read the telephone number on his collar. Joy and Sherry hopped in the car and drove to the man's home as fast as they could. Upon their arrival, they discovered that our prayers for Zach had been more than adequately answered. He had spent the night at one of the most picturesque homes in that neighborhood. The owner, a doctor that Sherry knew, warmly greeted them. He walked with them to the fenced in back yard and said, "Zack is a fine dog. He was no trouble at all. We put him back here so he wouldn't run away. I kind of wish we could keep him but that's just not possible. However, the funniest thing happened last night. When I checked on Zachery this morning, I noticed that someone had turned on the faucet in our backyard."

How many of you have ever lost a pet? Did you go in search of that puppy dog or kitty cat that went missing? Did you call the neighbors and ask if they had seen him or her? Did you say a prayer that the Lord would take care of that special pet that was so near and dear to you? If so, you are in good company. When an animal that we love is missing, we'll go to almost any lengths to find it and the same was true in the days of Jesus. That's why He told the people a story, a story about a lost sheep. When a sheep was missing, you stopped whatever you were doing and went out to find it because

sheep were valuable. Their wool supplied most of the clothing that people wore and their meat was a favorite source of food for festivities and for sacrificial offerings on religious occasions.

So let's take a look at this story and see if we can discern what Jesus is saying to us. In order to do that, I think there are three key words that we need to consider: saints, sinners and savior. Let's take a look at each of them. Here's the first one. You'll not find it in this passage of Scripture. Nevertheless, it's there. It just has a different name. The word is "Pharisee." Who were these people who criticized Jesus for the company He kept? They were the local religious leaders, who along with the teachers of the law, had a very high opinion of themselves. They considered themselves to be so to speak the, "saints of the community." They prided themselves on keeping the law, the commandments of Moses. But they went a step further. They created a vast system of rules and regulations based upon these commandments, which dictated how people should live their lives each and every day. For example, in order to keep the Sabbath they said that you could maintain a fire in the hearth of your home but you could not start a new one. That would be considered a violation of the law. As you can imagine an almost endless listing of such restrictions could make life almost unbearable. Furthermore they considered that these man-made mandates to be just as important as the Bible itself. Those who did not keep them were considered to be of little worth or value. In fact, they were called "the People of the Land." This is what the Pharisees said about them, "When a man is one of the People of the Land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secret, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of charitable funds, do not accompany him on a journey." In other words, the Pharisees considered themselves to be the saints of society, because they kept their distance from those who could not or would not live up to their standards. Little love or concern was bestowed upon "The People of the Land."

Now to the second word, "sinners." The Pharisees complained, "Jesus welcomes these people and even eats with them." Who were they? They were the undesirables of society which included a vast array of people. One group is even mentioned in this passage of Scripture, the tax collectors. These were people hired by the Roman government, sometimes even fellow Jews, to collect taxes. They were notoriously corrupt. They could charge whatever they wished. In fact, their reputation was so tarnished, that one city erected a statue to an honest tax collector. In this listing of sinners there were certainly a considerable number of thieves, brigands and women of questionable virtue. However, much more desirable individuals could also be included among their number, including merchants and laborers who did not adhere to the strict

interpretation of the Scriptures as described by the Pharisees. Additionally, everyone who was not a Jew was lumped into this category of sinners, especially if they had anything to do with the Roman government.

Lastly, there's the word "Savior." It, of course, refers to Jesus. When He saw the multitudes, that vast gathering of people, most of them designated by the Pharisees as "sinners" or "People of the Land," He did not distance Himself from them. He was drawn to them. In fact, His own disciples were for the most part "People of the Land." One was a tax collector, another was a former zealot, a fancy word for terrorist, and three were hardscrabble fishermen. On one occasion when Jesus was greeting the multitudes, He said that they were like sheep without a shepherd. He saw Himself as their shepherd, and I suspect that this may have been the inspiration for the story about the lost sheep. Like most of the people living in His day and time, He knew a lot about sheep and the shepherds who took care of them. Sheep require a lot of attention. They are for the most part defenseless and they can easily wander off and become lost. Even here in Bedford County, those who have sheep know that they are easy prey for coyotes and packs of wild dogs. For that reason shepherds were responsible for taking care of them. Each shepherd knew his flock, perhaps even naming some of them. In the evenings several flocks would be gathered together in a single pen for the night. The next morning each shepherd would announce his arrival and the sheep would leave the pen and follow him because they knew the sound of his voice. That is why Jesus said in John 10:3-4, "He (the shepherd) calls His own sheep by name and leads them out. When He has brought out all His own, He goes on ahead of them, and His sheep follow Him because they know His voice." Clearly, Jesus was referring to Himself. He was and is our "Good Shepherd."

Now, how does all of this, especially the three words—"saints, sinners and savior" apply to us. Well, let me share a story with you out of my own life and ministry. Years ago we opened our church to the homeless population in Portsmouth, Virginia. Our congregation, along with other churches, would take turns opening up our facilities for one week at a time to those who needed a warm place to sleep during the cold winter months. Our guests would arrive at 6 pm to a warm welcome and a home cooked meal provided by the church. After the meal and an opportunity to meet and fellowship with some of our members, they would settle in for the night on sleeping mats. The next morning a light breakfast was served along with a bag lunch and an invitation to return that evening. Sometimes we hosted over a hundred men and women. In the beginning there was some hesitation about welcoming this homeless population. We weren't sure we wanted these people in our facilities, using our bathrooms and sleeping on the floor

of our fellowship hall. What if they got out of hand? We were a bit reluctant to welcome these “people of the land” to our facilities. Sounds a little bit like the remarks of the Pharisees doesn’t it? Let’s be honest. It’s all too easy for us to distance ourselves from those whom we consider to be undesirable. It’s all too easy for saintly Christians to join the ranks of the Pharisees. It happens almost without us even realizing that its taking place. It happened in my church and I suspect it happens in a lot of churches. Furthermore, I suspect it can happen even in our own lives as individuals. It’s all too easy for us to join the ranks of the Pharisees.

Now let’s turn our attention to the word “sinners.” I doubt that the homeless people who came to our church would have used the word “sinner” to describe themselves. However, they all knew that they were not living on the “blessed” side of life. Otherwise, they would not have been there. For a wide variety of reasons, they had nowhere else to turn. The hospitality of churches like our own was the only thing that separated them from an even worse predicament. However, as we got to know these people, our attitudes about these folks began to change. Yes, some of them were hard to deal with, especially those with a history of drug abuse and alcoholism. However, there were others who surprised us. Some were gainfully employed in fulltime jobs. They just didn’t earn enough money to rent an apartment and buy a car to get them back and forth to work. They chose transportation instead of housing. Others had been middle class and sometimes even upper class individuals, who for a variety of reasons had lost everything—their homes, their families, and their livelihoods. We began to see these people not so much as sinners, but as people who needed a helping hand. On several occasions we were able to do just that and lives were changed for the better. How about here in Bedford? Are there some folks that we need to reach out to, people who are living on the margins of life? Who is ministering to these people? Have we or any of our churches taken the time to get to know these folks and invited them to become a part of our communities of faith?

This brings me to the last word, “savior.” The homeless people who came to our church needed a savior. In a small way we were fulfilling that need with food and a place to stay. But they needed a lot more. They needed the “Savior,” and we did our best to introduce Him to our guests. The fact is, however, all of us, both saints and sinners alike need a Savior. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, and that includes everyone, no matter their station in life. Yes, Jesus spent a lot of time with sinners. That is one of the reasons why He was so harshly criticized. However, He also spent a lot of time with the saints. In particular, I remember the account in the Gospel of John about Nicodemus. Here was a man from the highest echelons of society and religion

coming to meet with Jesus at night. What did Jesus say to him? He told him, “Nicodemus, you must be born again!” Rich or poor, saint or sinner, the answer was and is the same. We must experience a spiritual rebirth in order to be saved from our lostness. The Bible says, “All we like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6). Jesus is the “Good Shepherd.” He gave His life for us. He and He alone can save us.

No one, perhaps, has ever understood that truth more fervently than a man by the name of Francis Hopkins. Born in 1859, Francis grew up in Lancashire, England. When he became an adult he first planned to become a priest in the Roman Catholic Church but failed to qualify. Next he turned to his father’s profession of medicine and failed just a miserably at that as well. For three years he wandered the streets of London, a homeless vagabond who contracted the opium habit during an illness. He had become a drug addict. Literally snatched from the jaws of death, he was rescued by an English literary couple, Wilfrid and Alice Meynell who helped him find his true vocation in life as a writer. He became a poet and published three volumes of poetry. One of his most famous poems is called “The Hound of Heaven.” Like that well known canine, who doesn’t give up until he finds the person whose scent he has been following, Francis Hopkins knew that Christ the Good Shepherd keeps on searching until he finds us. That’s what he discovered and that’s what he wrote about in “The Hound of Heaven.” Listen to its opening words: “I fled Him, down the night and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind; and in the midst of tears up I hid from Him, and under running laughter, up vested hopes I sped; and shot, precipitated, adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears, from those strong Feet that followed, followed after.”

Jesus is our Good Shepherd. No matter who we are or what we have done, whether we think of ourselves as a saint or a sinner, Jesus is in the business of going out into the highways and byways of life, looking for that one lost sheep, looking for you and for me.