

## Parables 2 – The Lost Sheep

Matthew 18:12-14

<sup>12</sup>What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? <sup>13</sup>And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. <sup>14</sup>So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.



A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly point.

What a wealth of insight is captured in the three simple verses from today's reading. The heavenly point is made clear in the summary verse (v. 14) that this story is about "...the will of your Father in heaven".

To explore the significance of this parable for us, let's enter into it imaginatively from the point of the two main characters: the *straying sheep* and the *seeking shepherd*.



First the *straying sheep*.

I have no first-hand experience with sheep, but I know something about one of their four-legged cousins – dogs. Anyone who has ever had a dog knows that dogs have ways to stray.

One neighbor's dog was Snoopie. "Snoop", as his family called him, was a beagle and from time to time we would hear one of the Belangers yelling to the dog as they ran down the street in full chase after him. Snoop's m.o. was to fly out of the house and run until his short legs wore out.

My son's dog is named after the jazz singer, Etta James, who sang famously "At Last". Etta is a lovely, young dog who loves walks through the woods. One day I took Etta for a walk and as we were coming out of the woods, I called to Etta so that I might put her leash on her. Her m.o. was that whenever I got close to her, she would run just far enough away that I was not able to catch her.

My dog growing up was different. Samantha was a St. Bernard who didn't have much run in her. But her m.o. was to move from one smell to another and in that way simply mosey away. I would get focused on whatever I was doing. When I'd think of her and look for her she would be gone. I'd walk down a few houses and find her enjoying the smells of a neighboring yard.

The first insight of this earthly story is that the sheep got away. Because the story does not say what exactly in the sheep's character led it astray we can imagine that it could be multiple things:

the dash for freedom, innocent wandering from the fold, or the desire for independence from the shepherd. The word translated by “goes astray” means “to wander away,” “to stray,” even “to be deceived” or “to be misled.”<sup>1</sup>

We might accept that from time to time, like sheep, people wander from the faith...or the center of the faith...or a commitment to the faith.

And because this story is not just about a human shepherd, but our heavenly shepherd, we must say that God allows it.

The freedom that God has given can be used for faithful following or for wandering away. We would have to say that God allowed the sheep to separate from the fold. The American Quaker, Douglas Steere, wrote that “love invites, but refuses to compel”.<sup>2</sup>

In either case if we can assume that from time to time, we’ll find ourselves away from the fold. There may be a clear reason such as Snoop’s dash for freedom or various factors that led to our straying, like Samantha’s meandering after neighboring smells. And in each generation, children first accept their parent’s faith, question it, and then make decisions about what they will believe and do.



However a sheep strays from the flock there is comfort in knowing that our God is a *seeking shepherd*. A part of the power of this short parable is that the shepherd leaves the sure thing, the greatest economic value, the 99, for the 1 that is lost.

The parable ends that “<sup>14</sup>So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”

While God allows us the freedom to stray our heavenly shepherd wills that none be lost and seeks out such as our children, our friends and colleagues.



As we learn in the beginning of Matthew 18, Jesus was speaking to his disciples and so we think that this parable would be directed to our leaders.

How does this parable address us?

One of the ways is in how we think about our flock. How do you view the people who have gathered here today? ...and what about the people who are not here today?

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<sup>1</sup> See Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 55

<sup>2</sup> Douglas V. Steere, *Intercession, Living with God in the World*, Upper Room Books, Nashville, 193, p. 225

I'm guessing that we think of them as we think of others in our world; they are independent people who are responsible for their lives.

But in this parable, individual sheep are much more: they are loved by God, precious in God's sight, worthy of Jesus' sacrifice and intercessions. And our God wills that not one of them be lost from the fold – now or in the life to come.

When we read in the Psalms that God never slumbers and never sleeps<sup>3</sup> it is, in part, out of concern for this flock that belongs to God.

And if this flock matters to God it appropriately matters to each one of us. We are to love the people God loves and to care about them as God cares for them.

That suggests that we are rightly concerned not just about the church's finances, the church's program, the church's institutional health, but we have concern for the individuals who are a part of this flock.

On behalf of our loving, seeking shepherd, we are our brother and sister's keepers. We are the embodiment of God's shepherding care for all the sheep in this flock.

Knowing the fold that we may recognize each in the flock is a worthy goal, but it is also the prerequisite for caring for the flock.

To know those who are seated near to us in worship enables us to care for them.

From time to time one in the fold goes missing. We may think that we're being loving by allowing people to do whatever they want to do. We're being good neighbors by not nosing in, but the fact is that when people go missing there are often reasons for that: sickness, family trauma of some sort, or a personal trial.

This is where you all are essential. In a small church, it's obvious when a person goes missing. And likely the country church member gets several calls from members if one who is normally present is suddenly absent.

In our size church, however, it is not so easy. We try to follow up with fellowship pads, but not everyone signs them.

Clearly, the front line of care for the shepherd's flock is you and me as we are aware of those who are a part of our fellowship groups and in our "neighborhood" in worship.

Following up on someone we know is missing – calling them in care

Not – where were you?

But – I missed you and wonder how you're doing

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 121

Not – you should call the pastor  
But – may I share this with a pastor or an elder

If we were only good citizens we'd allow people great freedom and not nose into another's business

Being a good Christian, however, recognizes that we are the ones who embody God's shepherding care for everyone.

For me, I'd rather get 10 emails about a person having surgery than miss the person in their time of need. And it happens.

Another implication of this parable is that we must not be the stumbling blocks that cause sheep to wander. A conversation this past week someone said to me is fighting churches is not of God and causes me to stay away from organized religion.

One of Presbyterian's historic statements worthy of remember is the Great Ends of the church one of which is that we are to be an exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

How we  
interact...  
care for one another...  
deal with our differences...  
care for the world...

is a reflection of something...when we think about it, and act on our faith, it is a reflection of the kingdom of heaven.

So if this earthly story has heavenly meaning for us it includes:

Realizing that these others are not "its" but God's beloved sheep  
We may in our life together reflect the kingdom of heaven and be a draw to God's fold.

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