

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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16 September 2007

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10

When I initially checked to see what today's gospel reading was, I thought, well, that's familiar enough. Who didn't grow up looking at the painting of the soft and gentle, meek and mild Shepherd Jesus carrying a little lamb on his shoulders? How hard can that be? And then I checked the magazine I check most every week for somebody's reflections on and interpretation of at least one of the day's lessons, and it was entitled, "God's Party Time" – and I thought, how cool is that? I can have fun going there! But then I read some commentaries. And they pushed me back to read the Bible more closely. And I began to feel something deep in the hollow of my stomach that whispered, maybe this isn't going to be as easy as you thought. And I guess some of that depends on where you sit, and with whom you identify. There seem to be at least 3 perspectives to these parables, any and all of them equally fair to the stories. One starts from the question of when you might have lost something you really care about, and just how frantically and how long you searched until you found it. Or did you decide it wasn't worth turning the house upside down, and moved on? Another approach is to ask whether you have ever felt lost – and just how lost were you – and how did it feel to be found? And the third, most annoying question centers around the notion of who around us is lost that we need to go seek and find – even though we haven't noticed their absence, gave up on them reappearing eons ago, or quite honestly, would just as soon they stayed lost.

As I was reading one worship resource, I finally took the time to read some words that were boxed off by themselves, and was very struck by what I read. It was this:

"My father was seen as the proverbial 'lost sheep' of the family, His brother was a minister. One time we were visiting my uncle's church on a Sunday. He read the parable of the shepherd and the lost sheep, and then he actually said from the pulpit, 'My brother is here, and he is a sinner. God has called me to preach to him this morning, and so if the rest of the flock feels abandoned, I apologize.' He then proceeded to rail against my father in the most horrible way. It was incredible! I didn't think my father was such a bad person, and finally we got up and left. Ever since, I cringe when I hear this story, and hope it doesn't get turned into an 'us versus them' thing. I worry that sometimes we in the church think we're the good sheep, patiently waiting until God goes searching after the others. Maybe we're all lost." (*Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life Pentecost 2*, page 37)

Maybe we're all lost, needing a helping hand, a shining light, a welcome home sign posted just for us. But even if we're not, this text leaves no room for high and mighty arrogance or easy chair sentencing, wagging our fingers or clucking our tongues at other less fortunates who should take heed of their sins and give thanks that the Good Shepherd has come to round them up and corral their waywardness.

As is often true, this lesson starts with the Pharisees and the scribes, who are grumbling as only scribes and Pharisees can about the company Jesus keeps, that he welcomes sinners and eats with them. And of course, we know Jesus well enough by now to know that he isn't going to listen to them, consider their wisdom and finally realize that one of the ways first impressions are formed is by checking out who a person's friends are. We notice who manages the campaign of a presidential candidate, who works on the staff, who makes phone calls and passes out leaflets. Those things matter – to just about everybody but Jesus. The Pharisees warned him that hanging out on street corners with hoodlums was not going to help his ratings, and he told them a story whose punch line was, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance. And in case they didn't get it, he told them another story whose conclusion was, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

But that all assumes they were still listening by the time he got to the first punch line, to say nothing of the second. He opened those stories by saying to the Pharisees and scribes, which one of you, having a sheep... to which they inevitably said to themselves and each other, I wouldn't have a sheep, because I wouldn't stoop so low as to even talk with a shepherd, much less be one, thank you very much! Here they were protecting the good name and honor of the faith by establishing protocols and preparing the way to God. They had developed a sort of hierarchy that ranked the righteous and the sinners and everyone in between. At the bottom of that heap were the lawbreakers and folks who worked at dishonorable occupations like tax collecting and leather tanning and shepherding. And yet here was Jesus asking them to identify with a shepherd by putting themselves in his sandals.

And in case that hadn't offended them enough, Jesus went on to a second story, which he opened by asking, what woman having ten silver coins... He was saying to them that if they wanted to understand his table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners, maybe they could get there by imagining themselves as a woman. While their daily prayer was, "Thank you, Lord of the universe, that you did not make me a woman."

Jesus was consistently and graphically putting in front of them a vision of God's gracious and determined search for the lost. And inviting them to join with him in that work. Be offended if you want, but that's who God is, and that's what I'm about, and that's the work to which the faithful are called. Both parables are about losing, searching, finding, restoring and celebrating the return of what was lost.

It's striking to me that Jesus clearly describes God's search procedures as being open-ended and ongoing, as well as risky. Both parables include language that describes the search as lasting until the lost are found, however long that takes. Or as one commentator writes:

There is no estimate of the value of the lost apart from the determined search itself. In a world where the value of persons is relativized and classified according to age, race, class, gender, wealth, power and virtue, God's unrelenting search provides the true measure of a lost sinner's worth. Percentages are not factored into the intensity of the search (one of 100, one of ten); there is no acceptable margin of loss. (Roger E. Van Harn, *The Lectionary Commentary, The Gospels*, page 413)

We're the kind of folks who are apt to weigh the costs and measure the choices. At what point have we expended more resources than it's worth, and now we need to admit that and move on? And we do need to be concerned with what happens to the 99 who are left on their own while we're out searching, don't you know? But Jesus doesn't know. Someone is lost, and so the search begins. And will continue until the lost is found and brought back for a welcome home celebration, the likes of which we've never seen. And no, please don't ask about how many coins will be spent on the party, and what the ratio is to the one that we spent all that time searching for. Just throw the party, and throw open the doors and welcome your friends in to join in the party.

One commentator encourages us to picture Jesus and his table guests in the middle of our church. People are coming and going. A steady stream of people from all nations, races, ages and cultures make their way to the tables. Sometimes there is a brief wait for a place to eat or stand around. No one seems hurried, yet no one's turned away. Quiet conversation can be heard around the table. Prayers (are woven through) the speaking and listening. Laughter and tears seem to take turns. Soup and bread are in steady supply. Songs seem spontaneous. (page 414)

What would a church be like if it was shaped by Jesus' table fellowship with sinners. And by his relentless search to find the lost? What difference would that focus make to our life together, who and how we welcome, how we understand our mission as a people of God? Perhaps it would look a lot like the way Howard Thurman described the work of Christmas, which I would generally call the work of God. Thurman wrote:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with the flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among brothers (and sisters),  
to make music in the heart.

That's the work of God, and the work of the Church, and the ministry to which Christ calls us.

Amen.