

“Rally the Flock, Find the Lost Sheep”

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September 11th, 2022

The changing season brings about several themes to contemplate - three in particular today.

First, it's Rally Day! The kickoff of our new faith formation year and the return of choir, handbells and other congregational activities that go dormant over the summer. New beginnings are exciting, and also a little uncertain. Our congregation is in its own season of uncertainty as we look ahead to church life with a new pastor. We can move into this new season knowing that God's plan is always unfolding in our lives, in this church and the greater community. Like in Romans 28: “All things work together for good to them who love God and are called according to His purpose”.

Second, the lectionary contains the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin, our scripture for today, and the foundation for a lot of what this sermon is about, and third, it's the 21st anniversary of the attacks of 9/11, now known as Patriot's Day. What a beautiful dream it is to think that one day, we'll celebrate a holiday that marks the beginning of world peace for all of us.

As I meditated on these themes, I thought, how does one weave together new beginnings, lost sheep and the memory of 9/11?

Actually, Maria Montessori touched on all three themes in one statement: “Establishing lasting peace is the work of education; all politics can do is keep us out of war”.

So, as we begin a new year of faith formation, we can honor the memory of all those lost in war or acts of terror by helping to equip our children with tools for peace - empathy, compassion, a thirst for justice and a hunger for freedom. We can teach our young ones that we don't need to be defined by our past mistakes, that all faith communities teach love and peace at their core - it is only the devices of the human ego that have made spirituality into religious extremism. Jesus instructed his disciples, which means every one of us, to go out into the world and preach the gospel to every creature - to gather all kinds of people. Matthew 10 states that we are also sent forth “as sheep in the midst of wolves”, so we are to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves”. In other words, to be aware of what would interfere with our mission, and know how to deal with it peacefully and every creature compassionately. Meister Eckhart, the great medieval mystic and prophet, (declared a heretic in his day) states that “compassion means justice” and “clothes the soul with the robe of God and divinely adorns it” and “those who follow compassion find life for themselves, justice for their neighbor, and glory for God.”

Like our words of centering state, we must not forget that we belong to each other - every one of us - no one left behind or left outside of God's love and unending grace! Which brings us to our parable. The good shepherd who leaves 99 of his sheep unattended to go in search of the one who has gone astray. A lost sheep - who is a lost sheep? Who are the lost sheep among us? Is Jesus referring to a wandering lamb? An innocent who doesn't know the way back to the flock. I believe Jesus refers to someone who has truly gone astray, perhaps intentionally, made some poor choices, acted out in anger, followed an extreme lifestyle or religion...someone who must be sought after and brought back into the safety of the fold for redemption and healing. The human race is full of lost sheep - criminals, addicts, political extremists, religious fanatics, terrorists. On a day such as this, a day of remembrance for those lost in the 9/11 attacks, can we possibly think of a terrorist as a lost sheep, a soul worth redeeming? Or do we go along with the decrees of the world, meting out human justice or justification, exchanging hate for hate?

In the parable, when the shepherd finds his lost sheep, he rejoices and tells all his friends. There are no conditions placed upon his return - only love. Rejoicing that what was lost is now found. The shepherd is happier about the one sheep recovered than over the 99 who never left the flock.

The same for the woman who has 10 coins, and loses one. Does she say to herself, I have nine other coins, so why should I worry about the one I lost? Sometimes, I think this is the way we approach Christianity - I have a circle of sisters and brothers in Christ who believe as I do, why should I light my lamp and scabble around on the floor for the missing treasure? Because that's the one that is most important! It's also hard, because it takes us out of our comfort zone, pushes us to see value in those which society has deemed beyond redemption. A Course in Miracles states that "Forgiveness is the key to happiness" The woman and the shepherd are joyful and happy for what they have found. The Course also states that "it (forgiveness) is the answer to your search for peace. Here is the key to meaning in a world that makes no sense. Here is the way to safety in apparent dangers that appear to threaten you at every turn..." Forgiveness is also compassion and wisdom.

Did the shepherd punish the sheep for going astray? Does God punish us for all the bad choices we make as ego driven humans? I say a resounding "no" to both! God offers us, all of us, grace, mercy, salvation and atonement.

Consider Saul - before his transformation on the road to Damascus - spent years persecuting and hunting down followers of Jesus, many of them were no doubt imprisoned and some put to death. In 1st Timothy, we read Saul/Paul's words "I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, who has judged me faithful, appointing me to His service, though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor and insolent opponent." You might wonder why Christ would pick this despicable, self righteous guy to spearhead spreading the gospel beyond the reach of Israel. Because Saul was a lost sheep, who believed, out of ignorance of Christ, that what he was doing was right.

Saul goes on to say "I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus...I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost (meaning the foremost sinner against Christ at the time), Jesus Christ might demonstrate his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life".

The message is this: we are never beyond redemption, we are never outside the circle of God's love and forgiveness, and when our eyes are opened to the goodness of all God's children, it is our mission to see everyone through the lens of God's love - the criminal, the addict, the extremist. Anyone who we might perceive as "other" becomes our brother.

Does this mean that everyone must become a Christian in order to achieve peace in the world? I don't think so, because Christ and the Holy Spirit are not limited to the human construct that we call the Christian faith. Because Christianity itself is defined differently across denominations, because there are devout Jews still waiting for a Messiah, and holy people who see Christ in the mountains and the trees and the water, and call it the Light of Creation, Sami, the healing forces of nature. I believe that people of all faiths can and will come together to bring peace to this planet - through education, through seeking out and bringing all lost sheep into the fold, and by rallying each other to accomplish great things for the glory of God, by whatever name lives in your heart.

One of our most famous generals and presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower said this: "I like to believe that people, in the long run, are going to do more to promote peace than our governments. Indeed, I think that people want peace so much that one of these days governments have better get out of the way and let them have it."

Isn't it about time? Let's get out there, and start working on it!