

Seeking and finding

Menno Mennonite Church
September 11, 2022

Purpose: To allow ourselves to step into the roles of the seeker and finder in the stories of the lost sheep and coin.

Message: As Jesus shares the stories of the lost sheep, he offers points of entry each with its vantage that speaks of our individual need for grace.

Scripture: Luke 15:1-10

Synopsis: Jesus has a way of putting everyone into the picture, telling us each what we need to know. When we read the parable of the lost sheep leaving the 99, we easily slide into the assumed roles of where we identify in the story. We are the lost sheep, rarely the 99. We are the ones gathering in the rejoicing. Yet we are invited to hear the message with all ears and all roles, noting the role grace plays in many shapes and forms.

Luke 15:1-10

15 Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him.

² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying,

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³ So he told them this parable:

⁴ “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?

⁵ When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.

⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them,

‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’

⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

⁸ “Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

⁹ When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors,

saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.’

¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

One of the signs of a good story is where you find yourself in it. I love watching a bond film not particularly for the bravado and stunts, cool though they may be, or even the suave-but-somehow-cheesy way with the women that seems to follow 007 around. Its fun sure, but that is not what I am here for. I go there because when I watch one, even one of the ones I have seen a dozen times, I feel that much closer and a part of the world of high fashion and clear and present danger. I imagine myself with a tuxedo, a high tech racing car, and a sardonic wit striding the world stage finding the bad guy and bringing them to rights. Walking out of the theater it stays with you helping shape you even momentarily into what you have just seen. And its not just Bond—it is any film worth its salt. Bond is just handy because it is among the keener personas out there

But the best stories allow you access not just to the character you are supposed to like—the hero, the clear favorite or the like—but the other guy too. There can be as much depth and meaning in portraying the villain well and humanely as simply playing the guy in the white hat that we all know is going to win. Like a good book which can crawl inside the many motivations of a person’s head, and the many characters within the story, finding empathy and caring about fictional character is an excellent exercise for our minds, and even more so, our souls.

This is one of those stories that does just that that Jesus employs at this point in the Gospel of Luke. It is really a longer discourse on grace and the nature of God more largely—he goes on at length throughout the chapter. We know these texts well. We may well have the illustrations of them in our minds and our home. I was always fascinated with the image of the Good shepherd carrying the lost sheep home across his shoulders getting ready for a party and rejoicing in the found one. They are our stories and we know and live them well because we know our place within them. Yet there is more still to be learned when we allow ourselves to find our way into the wider mix of the story.

Where we best place ourselves here is in the lost that is found. It is the place of honor, and one reinforced by the later story of the prodigal son in the same chapter. It is also the position that makes sense for us and to us. The good shepherd who we follow is an active shepherd, looking for the lost and the lonely, bringing us each home. What a wonderful image—not least for which because it is true. We each know ourselves by our own individual struggle. It is not hard for us to identify that within us that craves redemption, needs rehabilitation. We may not speak of it, acknowledge it, or value it, but we know that it is part of

our lives that needs this salvation. As the old song goes, we are “prone to wonder; Lord I feel it; Prone to leave the God I love.” Knowing that this God who we are so prone to leave is in fact a seeking God in an incalculable affirmation and comfort. We love the stories of those who have been lost and have been found of course. But we also do well to receive for ourselves the reminder that we all need—even that which would hide from God, God is not deterred by. In fact it is this that God seeks out and looks for, welcoming us home no matter what. We need to know that we are of value—each one—and it is precisely when we are at our lowest when we can know that God seeks us still, values us still. We must live this part of the story because it is our story, whether we have been part-and-parcel of the faith for ever or whether we are among those still seeking and being sought. We must know that this is the case—the Shepherd seeks you; the concerned owner values you, and rejoices when you are found. The theological implication of connecting God with the shepherd and the woman means that God is 1) a seeker who 2) is not fatigued and 3) experiences joy and fosters celebration when the lost is found. That does not and can not change, and we do well to hold it carefully for the precious promise that it is. There is much to celebrate in being sought out.

Yet we cannot ignore the other side of the story. This side is less clear because it is the side that Jesus is speaking to and about. In the setting of the scene we have the comments that being on this lesson from Jesus; those of the pharisees and the righteous wondering at the company that Jesus keeps around him. These stories rebuke them and speak to them. Uncomfortable thought it may be, we can find ourselves asking some of the questions that they do and might. We might wonder at the economics of leaving the 99—it is not mentioned where or how or whether they we responsibly looked after—to find the one. We might acknowledge the logic to be found in the notion of acceptable loss, even when we know that this is not, cannot be the right answer. We can contemplate how someone reasonable would lose a valuable coin in the first place. We can wonder at these examples of God’s extravagant grace and consider whether it is really for us. While we might idealize the shepherd seeking the 99, it does not keep the 99 from feeling alone and wondering if it fully matters. There may not be pride in those feelings or particular celebration, but there is honesty and truthfulness along the way. It is good that we have a place to hold these less charitable feelings too.

There is still another role that we might try on here for ourselves in this story. It is the roles we reserve for God. What if these are the roles we are invited to take on too? To take up

the labor of seeking the lost, searching high and low, breaking out a good broom to make sure nothing is missed on the way to value, and, most of all, to rejoice in the finding and the healing even when we are not always sure that there is a good reason for a party? There is good reason for thinking that this might be the case both rhetorically but also effectively. “Which one of you,” Jesus asks, identifying the action of searching in these situations as common practice when the needs are on the line. With that in mind, is not the Son of God simply acting in a prudent and consistent manner with the customs of the day? This is what Jesus keeps asking us to do in any case. Should not we be going and doing likewise, trying to find the least and the lost where we can, joining in the celebration of a kingdom where those who are lost are celebrated?

Yet we know the energies of this. Finding space in the church for true variety of the ordinary variety of the faithful is hard enough; making room at the table for those who are still learning their manners as it were is way harder, and can challenge all of us at the very least. It is a tense thing to work at including those who do not fit, who do not speak our language, know our culture, or come from our way of being. Yet for the church to be the church, indeed for the church to survive, to say nothing of achieving its mission as ambassadors of reconciliation, that is precisely what will need to happen. Gone are the days when the congregation of the likeminded can, by itself, suffice. We now must find the way to join God’s rejoicing at the reconciliation where ever it is found, even when it is the place we might not look for it.

We need to be the sheep that is lost, the 99 left behind in confusion, and the shepherd joining God’s searching mission of finding and forgiving. It is hard work, because we ourselves are not always sure that we are forgiven, that we are celebrated in grace. But my friends, we must know that we are celebrated for the simple reason that we belong to God, and when we recognize that belonging, that is to be celebrated. The more we can live this the fuller our lives will be and the more ready we will be to take up the work and seek that which was lost and to work within it.

Where ever you find yourself in the story, we are invited to find ourselves within the world of Grace. And that is good. That is enough. That is something in which we can rejoice in, hope through, and embrace in hope each and every day. May we be given the will to share, the invitation to celebrate, and the love to hope within it all the time and always. May it be so. Amen.