

Sermon: The One Percent

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

11 September 2022

Based on **Exodus 32:7-14; Luke 15:1-10**

While we were on hiatus, the lectionary continued to follow Jesus on his way to Jerusalem. On his travels, Jesus managed to antagonize the religious authorities simply for being himself. He got into trouble for healing a woman in the synagogue on the sabbath; and once while having dinner in the home of a Pharisee, he put everyone in their place, so to speak. Most recently, he used an allusion to the Tower of Babel to illustrate the true cost of discipleship.

On the whole, it's an impressive record. Crowds followed him. The Pharisees and scribes feared him. The lost and the outcasts of society welcomed him.

Generally speaking, Luke's Gospel pairs the theme of God's love and mercy for sinful humans with Jesus' call for repentance and reconciliation.

It wasn't always that way. In the Exodus reading, the LORD was ready to incinerate a lost generation of Israelites for their misbehavior. But Moses, God's chosen one, convinced the LORD that these sinners were his people, and that God had made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Upon hearing this reminder, the LORD changed his mind and anger gave way to mercy. In that moment, love won.

In the Gospel reading, the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling about more misbehavior, that being Jesus welcoming sinners who came to listen to him and share a meal with him.

This prompted Jesus to tell two parables that raise as many questions as they answer. Each follows the pattern where the lost are found and rejoicing is a public event. The lost items represent sinners and finding them symbolizes not just their repentance but also their restoration to the community.

In the first parable, the shepherd does what you would expect a shepherd to do. He won't rest until he finds the one that is lost. That's his job and finding the lost sheep is that important. Meanwhile, he sometimes catches grief today for leaving the other 99 in the wilderness while he goes after the one. We know that the wilderness is a wild and dangerous place most of the time, but in this setting, it's much safer to be *there* than it is being lost and out on your own.

Now, did the one sheep repent when it was found? Did it *want* to be found? Did it even know it was lost? Spoiler alert: it's the shepherd's job to know when a sheep has gone missing.

When he got home, the shepherd gathered his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him. He didn't have to do this, but he did.

Next, the woman with the ten silver coins somehow lost one. Is this one lost coin ten percent of all she has? Is that why she's so anxious to find it? Luke doesn't say – she may have others. For us, it's just one coin out of ten.

But she won't rest until she finds the lost one. And then she too organizes a party with her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her.

But why use sheep and coins to represent the righteous and the lost? How does a coin, an inanimate object that can't move on its own, get lost? And everyone knows sheep are messy, not to mention smelly.

The sheep reminded me of something though. Have you ever been to a Renaissance festival, something like King Richard's Faire in Carver? Performers dress up in medieval costumes and so on. You can buy a roasted turkey drumstick for lunch.

There is even an organization out there called the Society for Creative Anachronism. Their possibly anachronistic web site says they are 'an inclusive community pursuing research and re-creation of pre-seventeenth century skills, arts, combat and culture.'¹

It occurred to me a long time ago that at these fairs and re-enactments, everyone is either a lord or lady, or a baron, a duke, an earl, a knight, or even a court jester. No one ever sees themselves as a serf or a peasant. Or, if they did this in first-century Judea, as a shepherd.

The point of the parables, then, is not about the sheep or the coin. The point is, if you lose something, you search until you find it and then you rejoice.

Sometimes, it doesn't work out the way you hope it will.

Mikhail Gorbachev, who died on August 30, served as the last leader of the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991. When he took over, his dilemma was this: he could either introduce institutional reforms or keep the system as it was, stuck in time with a stagnant economy.

He chose liberalization, which is always dangerous in an authoritarian government, and he took a lot of criticism for it. His enemies called him a bumbler who didn't know what he was doing. What they really feared was the turmoil of change and its effect on their personal power.

But Gorbachev was looking for something more than just the survival of the government. He realized that the Soviet regime had no moral compass, that it was incompatible with human dignity. In 1987, he announced ‘a reappraisal of values.’ “A new moral atmosphere is taking shape in the country,” he told the Central Committee; radical change was needed.

As we know, this moral cleansing of the Soviet state took off and could not be contained.

After the Soviet Union was dead and buried, Gorbachev said the Russian people rejected the Soviet model because it did not respect people. It could only offer spiritual and political oppression. He said, “What was most important for us was always connected to freedom.”²

The lost morality Gorbachev was looking for and the tremendous change he brought about, ended up freeing millions of people. He was the shepherd no one knew they needed.

Gorbachev notwithstanding, the shepherd has always been an image of God. Exhibit A would be Psalm 23. The woman in the parable should also be seen as an image of God. The lost items represent sinners; finding them symbolizes their restoration.

These parables help define both God’s character and Jesus’ mission. They present God and Jesus as searchers for the lost, the wayward, and sinners. Luke calls his audience – us – to show the same concern and to rejoice when the lost return to God and to God’s people.³

One last question to think about might be this: in Luke’s setting, after hearing Jesus tell the parables, of those who heard him, the tax collectors and sinners, the Pharisees and scribes, who are the lost?

God is searching for us even as we seek out God. In the Exodus reading, the people couldn’t see a tangible God, and they were led astray. But the LORD is a merciful God who would rather forgive than punish.

In the end, it’s about God’s joy at finding the lost. God wants to find us, and if we’re looking for God, God wants to be found.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.sca.org/>

² Leon Aron, “Mikhail Gorbachev’s was a truly great revolution”, The Hill, 31 August 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/3621811-mikhail-gorbachevs-was-a-truly-great-revolution/>

³ Tannehill, R. *Luke*. Abingdon Press (1996), 239.