

First Presbyterian Church of Ware Shoals

06.10.18

“Looking for Our Missing Sheep”

Our Old Testament text today is Deuteronomy 7:9 (CEB)

Know now then that the Lord your God is the only true God! God is the faithful God, who keeps the covenant and proves loyal to everyone who loves God and keeps God’s commands—even to the thousandth generation!

Our New Testament text today is Matthew 18:12-14 (NRSV)

12 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? **13** And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. **14** So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.

This is the Word of the Lord ((Thanks be to God))

Last year, I had the opportunity to go to Israel. On the first day there, we were walking around the hill country and learning about the history of the land. We walked down a small hill and I saw a young girl who was a herding sheep. As far as I saw, she was alone. She didn’t have her family around to help her. She simply knew what to do and how to take care of her flock. She stood in the middle of the sheep, walking with them as they grazed the fields of Israel. It was incredible to watch. This girl was fairly young, and she had complete control over these animals. If one was lagging behind, she would call to one of her dogs to go collect it. She would poke the sheep with her shepherd’s hook to get them to move around, and she never stayed still for long.

The most amazing part of this scene was that she seemed to know exactly where every sheep was. She was constantly counting them and checking them all to make sure she had not missed any or lost them in the crowd. She knew exactly where her sheep were. She knew they all were together and the purpose in taking care of them. No matter what happened, she kept them together.

I often think of that girl, herding her sheep. She seemed to have everything together even though she was so young, and it seemed like she wasn't bothered at all by the daunting task of being a shepherd. She knew where all her sheep were.

The girl in Israel was so much different than the shepherd in our scriptures today. The shepherd seems to have a bit of a problem. You see, he has lost one of his sheep. Now just to understand, this isn't just an issue of a missing pet. This sheep directly impacts the shepherd's family. If they have one less sheep, they won't be able to sell as much wool or be able to provide as much food for their family. It is important if you lose a sheep.

Because it is so important that all the sheep stay together, this shepherd does the only thing he can think of to do, he leaves the rest of his sheep on a hillside and spends all day looking for this one lost sheep. It seems like this would be a ridiculous practice, leaving 99 to find one, but that one sheep was incredibly important. Luckily this story has a happy ending- the sheep is found! So of course, since the sheep has been found and there is happy news, and all the sheep are back together, a party is thrown. The shepherd is happier over finding the one sheep than over the 99 other sheep that never wandered off.

Did the sheep wander off though? There seems to be a difference in opinion between the Gospels. Which is not uncommon.

In Matthew the scripture you heard, one of the sheep has "gone astray" seeming to imply the sheep's fault in the matter. But when the shepherd isn't watching closely, sheep wander. The fault would lay with the shepherd themselves rather than the sheep. In contrast, in the Gospel of Luke, the sheep has not wandered off. It has gotten lost. The loss is seen in the present tense, spoken as "losing one." This is not simply that it has wandered away from you, you have lost this sheep. The shepherd wasn't paying attention to all the animals.

I am sure we have all lost something. This week, I was part of the community following the loss of a dearly loved childhood toy. You see, my cousin, Lauren, has a daughter who is about 8 years old. Her name is Ashley, and Ashley has a stuffed bear named "Pink Bear." Well last Monday, Lauren posted on Facebook to her friends that Pink Bear was missing. Ashley was devastated and couldn't be consoled. Now rest assured, Ashley has many stuffed animals. She would not have to suffer through a night without a soft animal to help her sleep. She simply had lost only one of her stuffed animals. But as we all know, Ashley needed to look for her lost bear. She couldn't possibly worry about the other 99 stuffed animals without finding the one that was lost.

She needed Pink Bear. I followed closely on the updates and posts from Lauren's friends that Pink Bear had not been seen around town, but that they were praying for the bear's safe return. Many people were posting about how they too had lost a childhood toy, and they hoped Ashley would be ok. Luckily, there is a happy ending for Pink Bear. After several hours of searching, he was found in Ashley's closet, trapped between dresses that had been hung up, and therefore a perfect hiding place for a bear. I'm telling you though, I have never seen such a party as when Lauren told her Facebook friends that Pink Bear had been found. Everyone was rejoicing that Ashley had her beloved toy back.

It seems like, we have often participated in the parable of the lost bear. The parable of the lost key. The parable of the lost sweater, that our sister probably took anyway. When I hear the parable of the lost sheep though, often Jesus is referred to as the shepherd, looking for us while we are wandering from the flock. But today, I would like to challenge you. I would like to ask you if you have ever been the shepherd looking for your lost sheep. Maybe you're better at keeping track of things than I am. But I know for a fact, I have 100 things to do today. 99 of them will definitely get done. Often though, I will miss one or two. I'm curious if you have that feeling too, if you can relate to the process of having to search for the thing you have lost, or set down, or not watched carefully enough.

If you are like me, there is a chance that the sheep you're missing is your relationship with our God. There have been times when all my sheep haven't been taken care of, when I have lost one of my sheep, due to my carelessness. There have been times when that

relationship hasn't been my priority. I can remember times in high school, or college, or deaths in my family, when I have set down that relationship. I have wandered away from it. Only to look up months later and realize the sheep has been lost.

The thing is that God doesn't leave us, that is not the problem. This is not the problem of God deciding that we are not worth sticking around. God doesn't desert us. We see that time and time again in the Bible. In the Old Testament Scripture today we see it perfectly, Deuteronomy 7:9, "Know now then that the Lord your God is the only true God! God is the faithful God, who keeps the covenant and proves loyal to everyone who loves God and keeps God's commands—even to the thousandth generation!" We know, because of this, that God doesn't leave us. God doesn't decide that we are done following God.

We decide that our relationship can be set down. We assume it will be only for a moment. We assume we have time to walk away from it for a time. In our flock of 100 sheep, we lose track of the sheep that is our relationship with God, when we pay more attention to the 99 others that are in our lives. When we lose that sheep, we have to leave the others where they are, we have to search for our relationship again, and when we find it, we can celebrate together with our community. Think of the people who you haven't seen in a while, if they were suddenly to show up and tell you all about their renewed relationship with God, and how they have seen God in their life. You would celebrate with them. Everyone would be so excited to hear this news and want to show their support and love for the renewed relationship.

God is waiting for us to deliberately seek the sheep that is our relationship with God. There are times in our lives that we have set it down, that we have assumed we could pick it back up whenever we needed it. However, now, we have moved our heard farther away, the sheep has become lost and as shepherds, it is our duty to find our lost sheep.

If you would pray with me,

Holy and wonderful God,

You have not left us. We have set our relationship down, and failed to pick it up again. We know you haven't left us, but we have left you in our past instead of bringing you into our present. Help us find our relationship again. Help us keep you in the center of our lives. In your name, we pray. - Amen