

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“WHERE’S THE ONE?”

Scripture Lesson: Luke 15: 1-7

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, September 14, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 15: 1-7

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

1 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 And 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 lost sheep.’ 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.”

Where’s the One?

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ So he told them this parable: ‘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? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 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.” 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’” (Luke 15:1-7).

This summer, we were fortunate to enjoy a family reunion during the first week of August on the Isle of Palms. At the end of the week, we wanted to take a family picture, so we lined up everyone on the back stairs, from top to bottom. There were 27 of us in total, but our oldest son, Harrison, had to work that day and couldn’t be in the picture. Knowing that the photo wouldn’t be complete without him, we left an open spot on the stairs, and then we asked Harrison’s now-fiancée, Carolyn, to use her graphic skills to edit him into the picture, and she did just that. We weren’t going to have a family photo with someone missing. I suppose we could have said, “Well, we’ve got 99% of the family in the photo...that’s good enough.” No! You typically either wait until the person can be there or, in our case, you find a way to Photoshop them in.

I share that story because it is clear from the breadth of the Scriptures that God is never content with leaving someone out. It is in God’s good nature to search for the missing sheep until it is found and the flock is complete. In the parable that Jesus tells us in Luke 15, a shepherd has 100 sheep. One of them goes missing, while the ninety-nine remain safe in the fold. By any human standard, that’s still an A+. I mean, that’s better than most of us do in life. How many of us would have gladly taken a 99 in a difficult class? Imagine a sports team winning 99% of their games! Ninety-nine

percent is good enough in a great many contexts, but not in this situation, not when it comes to the Good Shepherd, and not when it comes to us. To Jesus, the one sheep that's missing matters just as much as the ninety-nine sheep that are safe.

We often pride ourselves on numbers in this side of heaven. Here in Charleston, for example, we count how many people live here, how many people visit; we keep track of how many attend events like Spoleto or other local festivals. We like to have a sense of how many people participate in various activities. And we do this in the church as well; we count worship attendance, pledges, and children in Sunday School, and we break it all down, and, at the end of the day, sometimes we just accept it. But the Bible tells us that God's math is different. God does not settle for "above average." God doesn't say, "Well, ninety-nine is pretty good, after all." Rather, God asks, "Where's the one?"

Psalm 23 provides us with insight into the nature of the Good Shepherd, which is the very heart of the divine. It begins with, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want." Within the Psalm we hear of a rod and a staff, and while they serve as a means of discipline and protection, they also serve as a means of comfort: "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." We don't think of them in this way, but a rod and a staff are also for counting. When the sheep return to the fold at night, the Shepherd would gently tap each one on the shoulder to ensure that all were accounted for. In this way and others, the Shepherd proves to be most attentive: he knows exactly how many sheep are present, and he knows when one is missing. And consider how the Shepherd does not stop to assign blame, saying, "That sheep wandered off; it's his/her fault." He doesn't ask whether the lost sheep is young or old, strong or weak, valuable, or expendable. God just leaves the ninety-nine immediately and goes in search of the one that is lost.

Psalm 23, along with our reading from Luke 15, demonstrates for us what grace truly looks like. God's grace does not wait for the sheep, who may have wandered off, to return on their own. Grace does not write off those who stray. Instead, grace searches, pursues, and insists. It says, "I will not be satisfied until my flock is whole." Here's an interesting statistic: the majority of Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations have fewer than 250 members, nearly two-thirds of our congregations having fewer than 100 members. By denominational standards, we are an exception. Having 56% of our members 55 years old or younger is just one of the many indicators that show how blessed we are as a church family. However, it also underscores the responsibility we carry, not only to persevere in "the race that is set before us," but also to give God thanks and praise for the abundant expressions of grace that we do see, and they are so evident! That said, we must also remember that we cannot confuse health with completion. God surely looks at Charleston, this Holy City of ours, and sees believers searching for parking on Sunday mornings as they make their way to church; sees students involved in campus ministry at the College of Charleston; sees numerous and exceedingly faithful individuals in schools, offices, and industry—God sees all of them and delights in them, whoever they are and wherever they are—yet God still asks the question: "Where's the one?"

By God's standards, ninety-nine percent is never enough. Yet how quickly we rationalize our inaction: "I would reach out to that neighbor, but they don't seem interested in church," or, "I'd send a note, but I don't want to bother them," or, "I'd make that call, but there's a full slate of football games on TV today." The Good Shepherd, on the other hand, never waits for a more convenient time. Our Shepherd doesn't say, "Let me just finish this sermon," or, "Let me make a quick run to the grocery store." God responds immediately and searches until He finds us. It's humbling, isn't it? Because we, the church, often wait. We wait until the time is right, until the brambles aren't so thick, until the night isn't so dark. But not God—the Shepherd never waits, and He searches until He finds it.

This aspect of God's activity in our life and in the life of the world is at the very heart of our Reformed theological tradition, for ours is a conviction that salvation is ultimately God's work, not ours. Left to our own devices, we are like sheep: "prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love." God knows this, which is why divine action is taken. In other words, God comes after us—not because we are worthy, not because we've earned it, but precisely because God has chosen us in love. Next week we will celebrate the baptism of little Jefferson Dominik. As infants, our children have no way of finding Jesus; but in baptism, we affirm that God has already found them, and Jesus has already claimed them.

Back to this morning's parable, we notice that when the Shepherd does find the sheep, there's no scolding, no punishment—there's only rejoicing. The Shepherd lays the sheep on His shoulders and brings it home, and heaven throws a party! Friends, though I believe this parable requires that we differentiate between those souls who are truly lost and then are found, and those who are found but whose lives continue to bear witness to God's ongoing and sanctifying work in new and beautiful ways. To be certain, this parable is especially about the celebration that occurs when God restores the one who was truly lost, and heaven erupts in joy. Does it not stand to reason that Christ's Church would celebrate the grace of God in our life and in our life together in other ways of returning as well? Could this mean that when new members join our church family, we don't just quietly shake their hands on the portico, but that we would rejoice? Or, when someone returns to worship after a long absence, we wouldn't say, "Well, it's about time," but that we would rejoice? Could this mean that when a child is baptized, we wouldn't treat it as some kind of ancient ritual, but that we would rejoice? And when that child of God one day becomes an adult and is installed as an officer in the church, we wouldn't say, "It is good that we have another Deacon; there's a lot of work to do," but that we would rejoice!

Considering our New Testament lesson in relation to our church family, I think this parable can mean a variety of things for us. At a very basic level, I think it means that we would be attentive enough to notice when someone is missing, bold enough to reach out, and trusting enough to know that God is forever about the business of seeking and saving the lost. There is another promise revealed here, and it has to do with the steadfast character of God. When God goes searching for the one, He may leave the ninety-nine, but they are by no means abandoned. To be sure, our Good Shepherd is more than capable of multitasking. That ninety-nine percent can look really good, but we cannot grow complacent. We can never pat ourselves on the back—as individuals or as a church—and be content with good averages. God has shown us that His love is restless until the flock is whole.

I love the story about Ernest Henderson, the founder of the Sheraton Hotel chain. He had a peculiar way of running his annual meetings. He gathered all his hotel managers, arranged them around the table according to their performance, and had the "most successful" manager announce his hotel's occupancy rate. In those days, if you could keep your hotel 60% full, you were doing better than most. Henderson's top manager might announce 85%. You can imagine him sitting tall, beaming with pride, only to have Henderson slam his hand on the table and say, "What about the empty 15%?" It didn't matter that the manager was well above the industry standard. Henderson's point was clear: success was not about averages; it was about completeness. I mention that story because Henderson's managers probably rolled their eyes, thinking, "Here he goes again," or, "Just go with it." But he wasn't just going with it—Henderson was echoing the essence of the parable that Jesus told: it's not about averages; it's about completeness. Where's the one? The Shepherd of Psalm 23, and Jesus of the parable in Luke 15, tell us that God is never content until every sheep is home, and, praise be to God, our Good Shepherd will not rest until you and I are home too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.