

Sermon: Which One of You

Year C, Proper 19

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Psalm 14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

Offered September 11, 2016 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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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? (Luke 15:4) 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? (Luke 15:8)

A single coin was one or two day's wages.¹ Which one of you would not look for that check if you had misplaced it? A single sheep was a month's wages.² And if you are worried about leaving the other 99 sheep in the wilderness, to Luke "wilderness" is any area outside the fenced in farms.³ And besides, how would you know if you had 99 or 100 sheep unless you counted them, presumably as they went into some enclosed area where you wouldn't double count someone.⁴ So, like Jesus' audience, we can agree, yes, we would search until we found what was missing. Because we know how many there are to make the set whole again. There are 100 or there are 10 and now there is one less than there should be. The group is not whole without the one that is missing. And we will seek until it is the way it should be.

Which one of you, having a Rescue company of six firefighters, and losing one of them, does not leave the five on in the plaza and go after the one that is lost until you find them?⁵

343 firefighters from the New York Fire Department, including a chaplain and two paramedics, were lost on 9/11.⁶ Those families will never be made whole in this life. There will never be the right number of people gathered around the dinner table. The set as it was on the night of September 10, 2001 will never be complete.

The parables talk about rejoicing. On this day of remembrance, do we leave aside the rejoicing? In one sense, we do, because the lost was not found. There was no moment with the sheep on the shoulders or the silver coin held up high when everyone can shout, what was lost has been found!

But we are an Easter people, we believe in the resurrection and the life. Those families will never be made whole in this life, but they will be in the next. The Good Shepherd was with their loved ones on that day. The Good Housewife brought them safely to a place of peace and order, where no one is lost. They now join in the rejoicing when a sinner repents.

¹ John S. Kloppenborg, John S., and Callie Callon, "The Parable of the Shepherd and the Transformation of Pastoral Discourse." *Early Christianity* 1, no. 2 (2010): 236.

² Kloppenborg, 237.

³ Kloppenborg, 248

⁴ E. F. F. Bishop, "Parable of the Lost or Wandering Sheep." *Anglican Theological Review* 44, no. 1 (1962): 50.

⁵ Wikipedia, "New York City Fire Department," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_City_Fire_Department (accessed 9/5/2016)

⁶ Wikipedia, "Emergency Workers Killed in the September 11 Attacks,"

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emergency_workers_killed_in_the_September_11_attacks (accessed 9/5/2016).

Which one of you, having 26,000 employees in the Pentagon, and losing 125 of them, does not leave most of them to evacuate safely and go after the 125 that are lost until you find them?⁷

When we seek we do not always find. Of the 125 who died at the Pentagon, five had no identifiable remains.⁸ When we seek, we have a temptation to seek in order to save. But salvation is God's work, we do not have that power, nor should we desire it. When we seek, we should do so in order to welcome. When we welcome people into the community, we are restoring the wholeness we once had. We are finding new ways that the community can include those who have been clinging to the edges or lost beyond the margins. Sometimes we go out to seek, and we do not find what we were looking for. When we seek with the intention of welcome, we are less likely to ever need to seek them again.

Which one among you, having hundreds of flight crews, and losing four of them, does not ground all the airplanes and go after the 33 people on those crews until you find them?⁹

If we go back to the beginning of the 9/11 story, we go back to the airplanes, to American Airlines Flight 11 and 77 and United Airlines Flight 93 and 175. When we go back to the beginning of the story we are reading from Luke we see not sheep and coins but tax collectors and sinners and scribes and Pharisees.

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." (Luke 15:1-2). Jesus agrees with the Pharisees and the scribes that the tax collectors and sinners are lost.¹⁰ But Jesus seeks them out. He welcomes them. He eats with them. He restores the community to include them. He doesn't expect them not to be tax collectors or sinners. Their place in the community, their place at the table, is assured. Jesus is making space in the community for them to repent. Repentance is not about feeling bad, it's about changing one's mind and one's heart.¹¹ If they repent, sure there will be rejoicing in heaven. But Jesus rejoices that they are here with him, eating and listening, so that the community has no more missing pieces.

By grumbling, by making snide comments, by deciding who is welcome in the community and who is not, the Pharisees and scribes are making the community smaller, more fractured. The parables that Jesus tells are part of his work seeking those cut off from the community. At first blush that's the tax collectors and the sinners. But as we watch Jesus preach and teach, we see that perhaps the Pharisees and scribes are even more cutoff, unaware or uncaring that they are reducing the community to shards.

Which one among you, having 19 highjackers, and losing all of them, does not search for replacements until you find them?

⁷ 26,000 from Wikipedia, "The Pentagon," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pentagon (accessed 9/5/2016), 125 from Wikipedia, "Casualties of the September 11 Attacks,"

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_September_11_attacks (accessed 9/5/2016)

⁸ Wikipedia, "Pentagon Memorial," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pentagon_Memorial (accessed 9/5/2016)

⁹ Wikipedia, "Casualties of the September 11 Attacks,"

¹⁰ Nixon, 73

¹¹ G. Penny Nixon, "Proper 19, Exegetical Perspective, Luke 15:1-10" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 73.

So on a day when we speak of rejoicing, of restoring our communities to wholeness, of repentance and welcome, what are we to do with the terrorists who have turned a date into a memory? We can be like the Pharisees and scribes and say that they are outside our community and they should remain there. But every time we get on a plane to visit our grandkids in San Diego, the terrorists are part of our community. Every time we gather to celebrate Bastille Day, they are a part of our community. Every time we go to the market in Mosul, they are a part of our community.

Perhaps the gospel calls us to that act of restoration of wholeness, to the change of mind and change of heart that makes that possible. Perhaps the example of Christ is the welcome that brings all people to the communion table. Perhaps if I were not so much of a sinner and a Pharisee, I could state that as an expectation from this pulpit, which has seen this community survive the transition to representational democracy, which has seen the rise and fall of slavery in this country, which has seen women shift from being property of their fathers to property owners in their own rights. But I cannot yet find the path within my own faith to call for the welcome of terrorists into our community. Even though there were many within the Roman and Israelite communities who called Jesus and his followers terrorists in his time.

But what I can do is point out what we, as a nation, are great at. We are great at setting up systems that allow diversity to thrive. We began as a nation which could not tolerate Quakers living alongside Congregationalists, and yet we constructed our religious and political systems to thrive with more diversity than the world had ever thought possible. We have the greatest health care system in the world, and we are making it even better. We have the greatest public education system in the world and we are making it even better.

Yes, at times, we have used our greatness in building systems to build systems of great evil and sin. We built the most efficient and productive slave system the world has ever seen. We took more land from more First Nations people than any other country on earth. We have polluted the planet far more than any single country. We oppressed women and minorities, the mentally ill and the disabled. We developed systems to create the most destructive weapons that it is possible to make. But we are dismantling all of those systems. Too slowly, to be sure. But we are doing so and we are building better systems so that those who seek to remind us that we have much more to do and much further to go can be heard much more efficiently.

If there are people whom we simply cannot find a way to welcome into our community, terrorists, people who hurt children, drug dealers, then we are called to find a way to keep them safe while we wait for God to find them and bring them back to us. We have to find a healthy and humane way for their connection to our community to exist, a situation where we are helping them repent, to change their hearts and minds. We have to find a way to recognize that repentance has occurred and it is time for rejoicing at their return to the community. We cannot pretend they are not a part of our community because how we live our lives in post 9/11 world affirms that they are.

In the end, everyone is welcome to eat with Jesus. All the sinners and tax collectors. All the Pharisees and scribes. The community isn't whole until everyone who is now lost is found and rejoiced over. How that will ever happen in a world full of such limited and broken creatures as we all are, we cannot know. But remember the words from 1 Timothy, "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus

Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to be in him for eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:15-16)

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? (Luke 15:4) 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? (Luke 15:8) And which one of you, when they come home, calling together friends and neighbors, does not rejoice with them, saying, “You have found what was lost.”