

leaving the 99
 a sermon preached on the
thirteenth sunday after pentecost
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 ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Exodus 12:1-14; Psalm 149; Romans 13: 1-10; Matthew 18: 10-20

One of the problems for really hearing the gospel, for those of us who have spent years at church, is that we can become so familiar with the stories that we don't hear the edginess of them anymore. Take the story that we call the parable of the lost sheep that the lectionary has put before us today. We all know what it's about, don't we: we all *readily* admire the efforts of the shepherd who searches until he finds the sheep who has gone astray – or do we? When I read this story with my year 7 students, most of whom haven't heard it before, what do you think their reaction is? Let's just read verse 12 again. "What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and **one** of them has gone astray, does the shepherd not **leave the ninety nine** on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?" Well, in my experience, 13 year old girls are mostly not too impressed by this shepherd: in fact they are very upset that the shepherd should be so pastorally irresponsible as to leave the 99. He should just let that troublesome sheep go, they say, and keep looking after the 99 who have done the right thing.

From the perspective of the 99, the behavior of the shepherd is unacceptable! What might befall the-sheep-who-haven't-got-themselves-lost while the shepherd is away? His absence exposes them to whatever dangers may be lurking in the mountains, a discomfoting thought! And then when the scallywag sheep is found, the shepherd spends time rejoicing. Surely that time could be put to better use: securing the boundaries, fixing the gate, or at the very least, scolding the sheep who went astray so that s/he won't go off again! In short, the students I teach, apart from one or two, and there are always one or two who think the shepherd is fabulous, are indignant! I'm labouring this a bit but I think to pass over the recklessness of the shepherd, from one point of view, is to miss the nub of the story.

So interestingly, in this story, and at this point in their life together, Jesus is not offering his disciples the comfort of the good shepherd who looms large in the Judaeo-Christian imagination. The shepherd of this little parable is not exactly the shepherd of the 23rd psalm who never leaves our sides, who accompanies us every step of the way; nor is it the shepherd who will later figure prominently in John's gospel: the one who, in contrast to the hired hand, never leaves the sheep alone, exposed to wolves. Instead in this bit of Matthew Jesus presents his disciples with a shepherd who is willing to risk the well-being of the 99 well-behaved sheep in order to go after the one who – whether through bad luck or poor judgement or mischief or a spirit of adventure – has gone astray.

So, the question is why? We are used to Jesus having a go at the Pharisees, but why might he be telling such a discomfoting story to those closest to him? I think to answer this question we need to look at the context for the parable. At the beginning of chapter 18, the disciples come to Jesus and ask him, "who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus'

response to this question, you will remember, is a combination of action and words: he calls a child, places that child in the centre of the disciples and says: “whoever becomes humble like this child **is the greatest** in the kingdom of heaven”. (v.4) Then he offers some harsh words about what will become of those who cause any of his “little ones” to stumble, and then he tells the parable of the lost sheep.

It’s reasonably clear from the disciples’ question that they are pretty pleased with themselves, pretty convinced that they have made it, it’s just a matter of what sort of elevation they can look forward to in the kingdom! Jesus tells this story, I think, to burst the disciples’ bubbles, to expose attitudes which are lurking not far below the surface (and which, as I’ve said, I find in my very honest 13 year olds): namely, their lack of sympathy for those who have lost their way, and their sense that it’s the 99 who deserve the attention of the shepherd, since they have toed the line! ...

Seen this way, Jesus’ reason for telling this story is to challenge the disciples’ ideas about who God attends to. It’s evidently not the accomplished ones, not the wise ones, not the influential, not those of superior taste and discernment, not the well-behaved. The sheep who attracts the committed attention of the shepherd is the one who has lost his way. So, perhaps it is those of us who don’t know all the answers; those who admit they are at a loss or at the end of their tether, those who feel the poverty of their resources – these are the ones who might find themselves touched by, and caught up in, the magic of the kingdom.

Jesus’ hope in telling this parable, I imagine, is that the disciples will be confronted into dropping their sense of superiority and actually be moved by the quality of the shepherd’s mercy the story reveals, an “infinite mercy” that can do none other than “search for the one who has gone astray.” And if these disciples are really touched by the action of this compassionate shepherd, then something else might happen as well: they might become aware of their own merciful hearts, hearts that can do none other than extend sympathy and care to the lost, including the parts of themselves that are lost.

The advice that follows this parable about what to do “if another member of the church sins against you”, is, I think, an attempt to see how we might truly reflect the shepherd’s merciful attitude in the case of a member of the church who has hurt us. While the line about letting a person who won’t listen to your grief become as “a Gentile or a tax collector” is a bit alarming perhaps, it seems to me that the spirit of this passage overall is to approach such conversations about hurt with care and respect: “don’t go upbraiding someone in front of an audience”, Jesus says, “rather first raise the matter privately, see if it can be resolved in that way and only then escalate it if your hurt is unacknowledged”. In other words, respect yourself enough to raise these things, but don’t go along in a high-handed way and do approach such conversations with a fair sense of your own failings.

The way I see it, this parable of “the shepherd who leaves the 99 to their own devices in order to find the one”, has the potential, if we will hear the edginess of it, to cause us to think twice about how sympathetic we **really** are to the human condition, how willing we are to accept the perplexities and confusions and wrong turns of others, and of ourselves. And if, by God’s grace, in this place of humility, we allow ourselves to be touched by the quality of this shepherd’s mercy, then the Spirit might lead **us** to see something surprising and delightful: the warm, compassionate heart that beats away beneath all our defences, the part of us that actually does want to be caught up in the joy of lives regained, re-born, restored.

Every week, as we prepare for confession, we hear about the God who “is steadfast in love and infinite in mercy”. As we turn now to the Lord’s table, may we be given such a glimpse of the quality of God’s mercy that we will be delivered out of ways of thinking and being that make

us indifferent to the pressing needs of others (or of ourselves). Then, we might approach each other with the kind of humility, wonder and kindness that is the mark of those who have been caught up in the kingdom of the one who never tires from searching us out. To that one be all glory and praise. Amen