

Sermon: What Happens in Sitka
Text: Luke 15:1-8
Date: October 7, 2018
Context: WWPC
Homecoming Sunday
World Communion Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

So he to

ld them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not . . . go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”

Luke 15:4

On the first Sunday of October in 1933, the Rev. Dr. Hugh Kerr, the pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburg, PA, celebrated World Communion Sunday for the very first time.

We don't know the full story of exactly why he did it, or where the idea came from, but it's easy enough to imagine.

Dr. Kerr's son, Donald, says the idea was conceived as an attempt “to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity—in which everyone might receive both inspiration and information, and above all, to know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is interconnected one with another.”

I'm sure that's an accurate account of what happened. But I also suspect there is a larger story in play. And for that we have to go back a bit further, to 1930.

Because the idea for this special service actually came to Dr. Kerr three years earlier, while he was serving at the Moderator of what was then the Northern Presbyterian Church.

Here's what we know about that time. We know that the treaty of Versailles, the treaty that brought a formal end to WWI, was signed only eleven years before, in June of 1919.

We also know that nearly twenty million combatants died in that conflict and another twenty million were injured. Throughout France, Germany, Great Britain and the United States living rooms and bedrooms that should have been filled with young men, were now filled with ghosts.

And then in 1929 the American stock market crashed, causing a world-wide economic collapse. Fortunes were lost, pensions were lost, jobs were lost, homes were lost, lives were lost. It was the second global catastrophe in a decade.

Dr. Kerr's son does not mention any of these things in describing the origins of that first World Communion Sunday. But I'm certain his father was not blind to what was happening in the wider world.

Surely he knew America was still wounded; that families everywhere were still mourning the loss of their sons and husbands and fathers. Surely he knew millions of Americans were in economic distress. Surely his ears open to the cries of the newly poor, the newly jobless, the newly homeless.

We don't know for certain, but surely those realities and those voices have something to do with why we are here today, celebrating this WCS.

And that brings us our text for today. For the past six weeks, starting on the last Sunday of August, when we welcomed new students back to campus, we have focused our services around the theme of Living the Questions.

If you're visiting today, you can see those questions on display on the signs that encircle the sanctuary, and you can also read for yourself the answers this congregation gave in response to them, which are written on the little leaves hanging down from the signs.

But that series -- Living the Questions -- is why we picked this text for today. Because it touches on the other main theme of this day here at the Warren Wilson Presbyterian Church and College Chapel: Homecoming, and what that means and what it looks like.

The story I read a moment ago is a well-known parable. Some of us first started hearing it in Sunday school when we were just four or five years old.

A shepherd is out in the field tending his rather sizeable flock when he realizes a single sheep has gone missing.

How does he know this? Does he sense something is wrong in the way a parent or a spouse sometimes does when their child or their loved one is missing?

We don't know. All we know is that a single member of the shepherd's flock is lost and he goes looking for it.

And he doesn't stop until he finds it. When he does he hoists the sheep upon his shoulders and rejoices. And then he heads for home.

In the church where I grew up, this brief story was understood to encapsulate the entire gospel.

That little lost sheep represents all the sinners of the world, and God sent his only son to go find them and save them, so that they might come home to live in heaven someday.

As an adult that reading of this story may strike you as simpleminded. If so, don't blame your first grade Sunday school teacher.

She got it straight from Jesus: "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."

So let's take Jesus at his word and grant that this one lost sheep represents the sinners of the world.

My question today is what about the other ninety-nine sheep? The good ones. The righteous ones.

What if one of them gets lost? And even more to the point, what if that one lost sheep happens to be you?

My friend, the Rev. Wanda Neely, got a first-hand sense of what that might be like no so long ago.

Eight years ago this month, Wanda traveled to Sitka, Alaska. Ordinarily Sitka is not a place you want to visit in October. The weather is terrible, unless you enjoy being outside when it's cold, dark, gloomy and wet.

But her niece was getting married, and so she had asked her preacher aunt to officiate.

So of course Wanda said yes.

“Do not bring nice clothes,” her niece cautioned her. “Sitka is a fishing village, and people do not dress up here. You will be walking around during the rainy season. Bring knee high boots and clothes for sloshing through water.”

Wanda had very little use for knee-high rubber boots in her normal life back in the lower forty-eight, but she also did not want to spend her entire time in Sitka walking around with cold, wet feet.

So she bought a pair she thought her granddaughter might want to have once granny was done with them: black with pink, green and purple polka dots.

The wedding went off without a hitch and the following Sunday morning Wanda decided to stroll over to the local Russian Orthodox Church for worship--the onion-domed church a vestige of Russia’s long cultural influence along the Alaska panhandle.

The weather that morning was as advertised: cold and wet. Wanda had taken her niece’s counsel to heart.

She believed her when she said that no one wears nice clothes in Sitka, so Wanda put on the clothes she had, warm informal clothes geared to that climate and that culture. She pulled on a sweat shirt, tucked her blue jeans down into her rubber boots, donned her rain jacket and set off for church.

She got there on the early side, so the sanctuary was still empty when she arrived. This gave her a chance to quietly take in the surroundings of the sanctuary.

The simple wooden floor; the straight-backed chairs lined up in precise rows on either side of a single aisle.

Toward the front, a section on one side for the choir; another section on the other side for lighting prayer candles. An array of icons spread around the room, the one sure sign that this rather plain space was an Orthodox sanctuary.

And in front, a simple alter framed by a curtain.

Wanda took a seat toward the front on the left side of the sanctuary. Just as she settled in, the church began to fill up. The congregation consisted almost entirely of women, children and older men. The younger men, the women's husbands, were all out at sea, fishing.

It was a Russian Orthodox church, though, so people did not immediately take their seats. After brushing the rain off their coats, most of them first took a moment to walk to the side of the church and light a candle before taking a place in the pews.

As she watched this slow, holy procession, Wanda came to an unsettling realization. Her niece had been at least partly wrong. It might be true that most people in Sitka don't dress up but there was one notable exception to this rule. The people who attend worship on Sunday at the Russian Orthodox Church do.

There she sat, feeling as out of place as a wildebeest at a bat mitzvah.

The problem in Wanda's case is that she did not just feel like she was underdressed. It was much worse than that. She felt like what she was wearing was disrespectful.

The good news was that the service had not yet started so in her mind there was still time to flee the premises before worship actually began.

She made the easy to decision to slip out, maybe crawling on the floor the whole way to stay under people's line of sight. Except that right at that moment the priest walked in, trailed by a young assistant. And with only a center aisle available to make her escape, the game was up. Wanda was trapped.

As suavely and surreptitiously as possible, she did what she could to mitigate her embarrassment and to make herself more presentable, or maybe less unpresentable is a better way to say it.

First she slipped her rain jacket over her sweat shirt. Then she gently pulled her blue jeans out of her boots in a way she hoped no one would see, and she slyly slid the pant legs down over the worst of the polka dots, like a CIA agent would do, if a trained spy happened to turn up at for worship in a Russian Orthodox church wearing rubber polka dot boots.

She felt good about her progress until she came to another dreadful realization: the women weren't just wearing dresses, every one of them was also wearing a head-covering, as ladies do in the Orthodox tradition the world over.

The situation went from bad to desperate. And as we all know, desperate times call for desperate measures.

Wanda reached down into her little day pack and pulled out the only head covering she had: a bright purple and gold stocking cap, emblazoned with the distinctive logo of the East Carolina University Pirates.

So there she was, a representative of the Presbyterian Church USA, looking like a weird cross between a six-year old and a college coed.

But she was not just any representative of the PCUSA. She was a minister of Word and Sacrament, and a female minister at that. She had the potential to be an emissary of our denomination, living proof that women can hold positions of ordained leadership.

And yet there she was, sitting in the pews of a Russian Orthodox Church, one of the oldest and most venerable denominations in the world, dressed less like a visiting minister and more like she was heading out to a tail gate party on a soggy Saturday afternoon in Greenville, NC.

So Wanda did what any of us would do. She slid down in her seat, hoping no one would see her and trying not to die of embarrassment.

She sat through the announcements and the homily. But then it came time for the Eucharist, the centerpiece of Orthodox worship.

I'll let her tell the story from here in her own words.

"I cannot walk up there to take communion, I thought. I should not have come. I do not belong here. As the people began to walk by, I slid down [further] in my seat. I bent my head down as if in prayer, glancing over to the side occasionally to see if people were still coming down the aisle.

"Finally, after what seemed like forever, the procession of people ended. The priest walked behind the curtain, and the young boy who had been assisting him went over to the side to put the leftover bread and wine in special containers.

“This is my chance, I thought. I will slip out before the benediction, so I do not have to speak to anyone. I grabbed my back pack and stepped out to leave. Only as I turned I felt a tapping on my back.

“I turned around, a speech of apology on my lips. And there was the young boy who had assisted the priest. His hand was outstretched to me. There was a napkin on it. On the napkin was a piece of communion bread. [The body of Christ, given for me.]

* * *

We’ve all been there, endured moments when it felt painfully clear we did not belong.

You may feel that way now. You may be wearing all the right clothes, and everything on the outside might look perfectly normal and respectable, but inside you feel like you’re channeling your inner wildebeest, completely out of place. Unpresentable. Unlovable.

Or maybe you came back to Wilson in search of that sense of home you once knew as a student, back when your life made sense and you knew that were accepted and loved for who you are, because your teachers drove that point home along with their other lessons.

But then life threw you a couple of hard curves as life is want to do. So you’re here because lately you’ve felt lost and disoriented. You’re not sure your life makes sense any more, or that you’re loved for who you are.

If you are that one lost sheep remember this: what happens in Sitka does not stay in Sitka.

The bread and the cup on this Table are filled with a grace that will hunt for us. They’re filled with a love a love that will search for us until it finds us.

They are symbols of that home Jesus speaks of in this parable--a home that will come to us, even when we are in the wrong place, at the wrong time, dressed in the wrong clothes.

Or maybe your story is simpler. Maybe like Dr. Kerr you look out at the world and you see that our country is terribly divided.

You hear the cries of millions of vulnerable and wounded Americans, cries that are being discounted and ignored by the rich and the powerful.

it leaves you feeling disheartened and angry, and wondering what has become of us, and what will become of us.

If that's you, remember that what happened in Shadyside Presbyterian did not stay in Shadyside.

The idea of this meal, and the practice of this meal -- this world-wide meal -- quickly spread. By 1940, when the world was again at war, it had become a global phenomenon.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer ate this meal. Thousands of members of the Confessing Church in Germany ate this meal. It helped fueled their resistance and helped inspire their hope for the future, even in the darkest days any of them had ever seen.

Dr. Martin Luther King ate this meal. The members of the Ebenezer Baptist Church ate this meal, as thousands of other worshippers who came from the north and the south and the east and the west to join them in their struggle for justice.

It helped strengthen them to march from Selma to Montgomery. It helped give them the courage and the fortitude to walk across the Edmund Pettis bridge, arm in arm, making peace and waging hope with their very bodies.

This is the food for the people of God, and today, on this World Communion Sunday, this meal will be shared in Christian communities from Alaska to Alabama, from Washington state to Washington DC, from churches right here in Asheville to churches in Africa and Asia and maybe even Antarctica.

So, whether you've come from the East or the West, the North or the South to be here today. Whether you live in Sitka, Alaska, or right here in Swannanoa, welcome home friends.

I have some wonderful news to share with you this morning: This bread is for you.