

Sermon: The Life That Matters
Text: Mat. 18:10-14 Parable of the Lost Sheep.
Date: September 13, 2020
Context: WWPC
Online worship
Rev. Grace Boyer's final Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine. . . and go in search of the one that went astray?

Matthew 18:12

The passage that Cadence just read for us is a sweet little story.

As short as it is, I think it's also true that it tells us a great deal about who Jesus is.

First of all, it's a story. And story is by far his preferred mode of conveying the message he came to reveal.

That's important because the meaning of this story is not fixed, not empirically verifiable. The meaning of two plus two is always four. That will be true every time you run that test. Two oranges, plus two oranges will always total four oranges.

But the meaning of this story, as with any story, is not necessarily fixed. Different people may well hear the truth of it differently.

For example, for much of the twentieth century, this story was often read, understood, taught and preached as a kind of missionary text.

On this view the sheep is a lost sinner. That the shepherd goes in search of it so doggedly tells us that Jesus won't be happy until everyone is saved.

That may be true. But that's a little hard to reconcile with the details of the story. After all, the lost sheep is already a sheep; it's already a member of the shepherd's flock.

This poor lost, little lamb doesn't need to be converted, it needs to be found. It needs to be rescued. This is not a missionary text, it's pastoral.

Or maybe another way to put that, and in keeping with who Jesus is, it's a love story.

Does the shepherd love all of his sheep equally? Of course he does.

Do all his sheep matter to him equally? Of course they do. Until one of them matters more. Until one goes missing, gets lost. Then that one sheep matters more than all the others. And the shepherd doesn't stop showing his concern for it, his love for it, until it is found.

Because of those specifics, this story has lately started to be read as a kind of prophetic text. Faith-based activists have used it to underscore their claim that Black Lives do indeed matter.

Yes, every life matters, the argument goes. Except when some lives, black lives in particular, obviously don't matter as much as others do. Until they do, until those lives at least as much as the other ninety-nine lives in the story, they deserve specific recognition and attention.

I get that. I actually find this reading powerful and persuasive.

But in the end I think this story is about all of us. Not just because all lives matter. But because I'm quite confident that every single person who has ever heard it knows what it feels like to be lost. To be vulnerable. To feel afraid and alone.

The mom who is suddenly stranded at home, because someone has to stay home and help teach the kids, now that their school is closed.

She's separated from her flock, the crew she congregates with every day at work. Suddenly she's overwhelmed with this new job -- with all the new jobs: working from home, doing her old job in a whole new way; teaching her children in a way that is completely new to them; being a spouse and life-partner in a time when everything has changed and is measurably harder; just being herself when she can't easily do the things she loves, the things that refresh and energize her, the things that restore her soul.

She has no idea how she's going to get through this time.

Lost in a wilderness of uncertainty, she is exhausted from the effort of trying to figure out everything all at once, and then having to do everything, all at once.

I'll bet she would understand this story.

Or the retired physical therapist. It's not just that she doesn't know how she is going to fill her days now that she no longer has any patients to care for. That's hard enough.

Thankfully, her dad taught her to fish back when she was a little girl. She has loved it ever since and was looking forward to doing more of it. But after three months of doing it every day, she has grown tired of driving her dad's old boat around in circles on the small lake near where she grew up.

So now, figuring out what to do with herself is the first hard question she has to answer.

But the harder question, the one that really leaves her feeling lost, is what to do about her son. Her beautiful little boy, now a grown adult, lives in a constant, alcohol-induced fog, and she has no idea how to penetrate that foul cloud.

She's tried everything: cutting off his money; sending him to rehab. Nothing has worked and she has no idea what to do, or where to turn to next.

I'll bet she would understand the truth of this story, what it means to be lost. For herself, and for her son.

I think there's a chance that the man who now occupies the most powerful office in the world might even understand the truth of this story, if he would let himself admit it.

How could he not feel lost? Overwhelmed by the number and the scale of the crises playing out across the country right now. Unsure how to handle any of it. Privately bewildered. Maybe even afraid, if he were to be completely honest.

Everyone feels lost at some point, and I would guess that everyone includes you. It certainly has included me at various points in my life.

So the question that follows is: if I am lost, when I am lost, how would this story actually “come true” for me?

That is a perfectly fair question. An important question.

Not for the first time, I must honestly confess I don’t know the answer. Not for want of study or training or desire. But simply because my imagination is far too small, and God is far too big and far too clever, for me to even begin to try to posit an answer as to how God might find you when you’re lost, and shepherd you back to safety.

What I do know is that this story is not only universally true about all of us wayward sheep who are prone to wander off and get tangled in the brush and left behind the others.

It is also enduringly true about God, the Good Shepard who will come looking for us when we are lost, and who won’t stop looking until we are found.

Because to God, the one life that matters is yours.

Thanks be to God!