

## SHEEP AND SHEPHERD

### I Timothy 1:12-17

#### Intro

I very much believe that Paul had a rather firm grasp on the sort of influence and importance that he had in the early church. He knew that his letters were being handed around. He knew that in many communities his reputation preceded him. He knew that the leaders of the Jerusalem portion of the church (Peter and James, the brother of Jesus) were watching how he moved and what he preached (especially early on) because they were afraid that Paul was acting as a double agent trying to bring the splinter group from the Jewish faith down from the inside.

He knew all of that.

These sorts of examples very much still manifest themselves in today's world. Whether it be in the world of business, politics, entertainment, or sports, there are a myriad of people whose profiles grow to the point that not only do other people recognize their influence...but so do they. And unfortunately, it feels like there are a whole lot of those folks who, well, they start to yield the power and influence afforded them in ways that shine a greater light on themselves ('Look at me! I'm doing a great job! You know you want to follow me!').

What about Paul?

Paul shows us a different way. Paul recognizes the influence that is beginning to be afforded to him...and he immediately reminds us that the only reason that he has any pull, push, or sway at all is because of the One who pulled him out of the muck and the mire.

God sought him out.

Nothing has changed: God is still seeking people out today. God is still seeking you. The scripture reads this way.

### **I Timothy 1:12-17**

12 I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service,<sup>13</sup> even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,<sup>14</sup> and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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 believe in him for eternal life.<sup>17</sup> To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

## **Luke 15:1-10**

### **Intro**

This seeking of God takes a very pointed shift in the life of Jesus, a shift that causes many around him to be not only uncomfortable, but offended.

Jesus, not surprisingly, responds to these critiques and does so not only through the telling of stories, but very much through his actions.

The long and the short? God is seeking you out.

But is it more than just, 'God seeks the lost and broken?' Should it be? The scripture reads this way.

### **Luke 15:1-10**

15 Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. <sup>2</sup> 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: <sup>4</sup> '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? <sup>5</sup> When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. <sup>6</sup> 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." <sup>7</sup> Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.

8 '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? <sup>9</sup> When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost." <sup>10</sup> Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'

### **'Sheep and Shepherd'**

Have you ever lost something?

Ok, that's a silly question. We all have examples of having lost something.

Personally speaking, I have been losing stuff at an ever accelerating rate as I have grown older. Documents (where did I put that)? Words (I think I wanted to say something...but what was it...silence ensues)? Ideas (it was there...and now it's not...so was it every a real idea at all)? Children (well, that last one hasn't happened...often. But I can certainly see a time when it might!)?

So we've all lost something.

So let me ask a different question, a question which absolutely relates to that which has gone missing: have you ever gone looking for that which was lost?

Here's where I want to go with that shift. Anyone who has spent any time in the church and knows some variation of the parables that we heard this morning loves them.

Why? Because they are rightly understood to be a reiteration of the passion that God has for humanity; that God has for each of us individually. God will continue to seek us out until we are found. The penultimate example of this truth is the sacrifice that Jesus was willing to make for each of us on a cross. He allowed himself to be killed even though he was innocent; even though he could have freed of the pain that he endured.

God did that for us.

Again, that's why we love that story.

But that isn't the only message that can be drawn from these verses and at the end of the day, it shouldn't be.

Paul recognizes this and that is why his council to Timothy (and certainly beyond) does not end with some variation of 'God saved even me: the greatest of all sinners.'

No, he keeps going by saying, 'I received mercy, so that in me,... Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him.'

Are you able to pick up what he's putting down?

Yes, God is going to continue to seek out the lost sheep. How do you think that takes place?

It transpires when formally lost sheep go out into the world with a vision that is closer to that of the Divine, seeing people with the needs that they have, providing an example that shows that there is a still better way.

I had started to have the seed of this idea (you know, an idea that I didn't lose!) when I gathered back with the Men's Group that meets on Thursday mornings. We are still making our way through the book of Acts.

It was there that we read the following in chapter 20 (which from verse 18 on recounts Paul's 'farewell' address to the Ephesian church) that Paul stated the following: 'Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God.'

I tripped over that line like someone who doesn't walk that much because it absolutely felt like confirmation of what had been pinging around in my head. It's our responsibility to be the bearers of God's light, which, as we have been talking about the last few weeks, can be done in a myriad of practical, 'makes sense to the gifts that you have been blessed with' sorts of ways. Even as God continues to seek us out, he also seeks out others who are also lost...and does so through us.

Because there are a whole lot of folks who are looking, in one way or another.

Some numbers to back up my supposition: a 2014 Pew Research Center Religious Landscape study showed that 89% of Americans believe in God (or a universal Spirit) but only 18% of that same population attend worship on any given Sunday (those numbers tumble when you begin to look at younger generations) – those numbers are based off actual church attendance numbers as opposed to what people say to pollsters.

And yet, on the days that followed September 11<sup>th</sup> 15 years ago, the houses of worship were packed as those people who believe in God all showed up looking for some level of clarity as their world was turned upside down and inside out. This level of outpouring shows that there are a lot of people out in the communities of which we are a part, who are open to the possibility that the church is more than just a building that you drive by and that God is more than a word you say when you stub your toe.

Now I absolutely get it: the church is a human construction that has more than a few flaws so the fact that people are shying away from organized religion does not necessarily mean that they are walking away from God.

But do any of us doubt that walking faithfully with the Divine is for too many something that is never thought of with the exception of when a life threatening illness or diagnoses rears its ugly head (and then all of a sudden, there are folks who start worrying about it!)?

Yeah, exactly.

But are we going to invest ourselves in being that shepherding presence in the lives of those whom we come into contact with?

Are we going to personally invite?

Are we going to actively help?

Are we going to attentively care, even when that caring may cause our schedule to become a little more crowded, because it's the right thing to do; the God thing to do; the shepherd thing to do?

And this is not about filling this, or any other church's pews. This is about recognizing that result that we are working toward is that vitally important. Seriously, we have no problems spending countless amounts of time on things that ultimately amount to nothing more than time killing. Shouldn't the lives of those who are around us (both the lives that are being lived in the here and now as well as the life eternal) count for so much more?

Look, we should be open to the presence of those who are not connected in some way to a community of faith and be willing, again as the Spirit leads, to plant the seeds that will one day allow God to bring them to a fold as he has done for each of you.

The call of our life is not just to be the lost sheep that is brought back to the fold.

Our call is also to be that of the shepherd, with God working through us, going out with a diligence that does not yield under the pressures that this world is able to lay upon us. We conduct this sort of search for things as small as a cell phone, and we should do the same for all of the children of God.

Let us go forth from this place and discover all who have yet to be truly found. Lost to found. It happens in God's time as we follow the Shepherd of all.

### **After Sermon Prayer**

God, so often we have been like that sheep that wanders off on its own and needs to be rescued and God, time and time again, You have brought us back. Lord thank You! However, this morning we also pray that you might fill us with the willingness to head from this place with the eyes and the ears of the shepherd, listening for that individual who is in need, who is in need of You. Grant us the ability to listen and to share so that through us, yes, even us, those who have yet to be totally found are once again returned to Your presence in a community of faith. In Jesus' name. Amen.