

“Being Jesus In Today’s World”

This month’s Scriptural emphasis here at Grace is on humility. I have asked you to join me taking a meditation card with you each week and learning the verse on it by heart. The idea is to carry it with you throughout the week and looking at it various times each day and spending a little time several times a day thinking about what it says. Humility is the opposite of pride and involves modesty about the ways in which God has blessed us. For example, a child might have the best singing voice in the school, but the child, in her humility, acknowledges her voice as a gift from God and uses it to make others happy by hearing her sing. She may know that she has the best singing voice in the school, but in her humility, she is modest about it.

Nicole Kidman, one of today’s most famous actresses, says about an early acting part: “I auditioned for the role of the angel in the Nativity play at school. I didn’t get it. I auditioned for Mary; didn’t get it. So I made up a character of the sheep who sat next to the Baby Jesus.”

Susanna Metz, in reflecting on Ms Kidman’s experience, said that playing the part of the angel or Mary would be a great part. But, what would the world be like if we all had more of a desire to be seated next to Jesus? What would the world be like if we imagined ourselves more often with Jesus’ hand on our head, than as someone going out on our own? These are musings about humility, aren’t they? (Synthesis September 15, 2013)

As always, in order for us to understand the stories which Jesus tells in our Gospel reading, it is important for us to notice WHY he told these stories. Regarding the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, Jesus told these stories in response to the grumbling of the Pharisees and the scribes. They were complaining about Jesus welcoming and eating with sinners.

I would like to look with you this morning at the story of the lost sheep. First of all, Jesus is exaggerating again this week as he did in last week’s Gospel. No shepherd would have a flock of 100 sheep because there is no way that a shepherd could take care of so many sheep by himself. Again, Jesus probably used this number of 100 sheep to get the people’s attention and to stretch their imagination. He talks about the shepherd losing one of the 100 sheep. Then, he asked them this question.

“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?”

Now, scholars tell us that Jesus’ hearers would think that what Jesus just said was ridiculous. They would think to themselves that no shepherd in his right mind would leave 99 sheep and put them at risk to go after one measly sheep. It just wouldn’t happen, end of story.

However, Jesus isn't talking about just any shepherd, because you and I know that this story was allegorical and in this allegory, the shepherd that he was referring to was God, or more directly, Himself as God's Son. So, what Jesus is saying here is that the extravagant crazy love that God has for God's people means that God would go to any lengths to bring back even one sheep or one person who had wandered away.

Jesus completes the story by saying, "When the shepherd has found the lost sheep, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. 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.' Just so, Jesus said, 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."

Now, let's go back and think again about why Jesus told this story. He told it because the Pharisees and scribes were criticizing him for welcoming sinners and eating with them, in other words, for spending time with sinners like the tax collectors and others. So, Jesus is saying to them that He is spending time with tax collectors and sinners in order to bring them back to God.

This little story that Jesus told is about the mission of the Church, isn't it? It is about that Gospel truth that according to the Gospels, Jesus came into the world to save sinners or the people who had wandered away from God. Jesus came to show them the way back to God.

At the time that the Book of Acts was written, Christians were actually referred to as followers of the Way.

When we use that phrase "the way", it usually refers to how to get someplace, doesn't it? It is the same with Jesus as the Way. He is the Way to reconnect or be reconciled with the God of Love.

In the 14th chapter of the Gospel according to John, Jesus is talking to his disciples about how he is going to prepare a place for them. And he said to them, "And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said, "Lord, we don't know where you are going. How can we possibly know the way?" Jesus responded to Thomas, "I am the Way, the truth and the life." We know the Way to God, Beloved, because we know Jesus.

In answer to the criticism of the Jewish religious leaders, Jesus points out that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the ninety-nine which need no repentance. The gist of what Jesus is saying to them is, "That is why I welcome and eat with sinners, because they are the ones who need me. They are the ones who have lost their way like sheep and have

wandered off. And God, in God's crazy extravagant love, has sent me into the world to seek them out and to bring them home."

Beloved, you and I are followers of Jesus, are we not? Yes, of course we are. That being the case, and in light of this story about sheep that Jesus told in today's Gospel, where do you suppose Jesus would have us spend our time? In places where we can get to know, eat with and rub elbows with people who don't know Him, right? Why is that? Well, it's probably because, going back to today's story about sheep, sheep don't often wander back to the fold, do they? No, the shepherd had to leave the 99 and go out and seek and find and bring back the sheep that was lost.

At the end of this service, and/or at the end of this morning of being at church, we are going to be leaving the fold, aren't we? We will be going our separate ways this week to all kinds of different places here in the Asheville area and beyond. Not only that, but as our dismissal at the end of the service says, we will be going forth into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit and to love and serve the Lord.

In fact, you have probably heard me say this before, "The longer I study the Gospels and think about our mission as God's people, I am convinced that it is God's perfect will that we go out and be Jesus in this world. Now when I say that I am not talking about some dumb caricature of Jesus which might be portrayed as a doormat for people to walk on." No, I am talking about us as followers of Jesus going out and being the real Jesus in this world, the courageous one, the one who would stop at nothing to bring people the love of God.

I think this is what the Apostle Paul meant when he talked about letting the selfishness in him die (dying to self) that Christ might live in him and through him. He wrote, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."

Now that doesn't mean that Paul was not still Paul. He was. But, as he put it, it was Christ in Paul, which was the hope of glory. Whose glory? God's glory, not Paul's. Jesus was living in Paul and bringing glory to God through Paul's life, at times, when Paul would humble himself, (there's that word again).

Beloved, as we give ourselves over to Christ more completely, the way the contemplatives describe it, (and I love this!,) the false self filled with things like pride, greed, selfishness and hate in us will atrophy and die and our true self will be manifest to others. The true self is the self that we have always wanted to be, the self that bears the fruit of the Holy Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self-control.

However, in order for this false self to die and the true self to come to the fore, we have to be following this Way which is Jesus in our lives. Through worship and meditating on God's Word and working and playing with others who will encourage us, we can't help but grow spiritually as God continues to use us and as we become Jesus in and to the world.

You are probably familiar with the standing orders that Jesus left to us before He ascended into heaven. He said, "Go therefore and make disciples of every nation, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe or obey all that I have commanded you and lo, I will be with you always to the end of the age."

The first word of that big long sentence from Jesus is "Go". The story that He told this morning was about a shepherd that was willing to go and find the lost sheep and bring it home.

I suppose God's sheep have wandered off all over the place, haven't they? We will find them in coffee shops and pubs, at music venues and bike races, on hiking trails and in hospitals and nursing homes. Where we are not likely to find them is in here, in the fold. We come to the fold to be encouraged to go out into the world and be the love of Jesus.

Let me give you an example of a way to go and be the love of Jesus in the world. A Lutheran congregation out in Colorado meets at a pub, I think it's once a month, for Beer and Hymns. The owner of the pub offers them a room. They bring their musical instruments and song sheets and enjoy singing hymns and drinking beer together once a month. Of course the message is embedded in the music and hopefully the joy of the singers is contagious. This is one example of "going forth in the power of the Holy Spirit to love and serve the Lord" that will appeal to the beer drinkers, the musicians and the singers among us, one way to be Jesus in the world.

Another example that I am working on with The Rev. Thomas Murphy from All Souls is to have a communion station on Sunday morning at the Leaf Festival this year. Leaf is a family friendly weekend of camping and music during October. This is another way of going and being Christ in the world.

In looking at the Parable of the Lost Sheep this morning, we are reminded that we are called to follow Jesus out into the world to be His love to those who have wandered away from Him or have never met Him. May our Lord empower us as we seek to obey His call. AMEN.