



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

306 N. Division Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104 • (734) 663-0518 • www.standrewsaa.org

Sermon for Sunday, September 15, 2019

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

FR. CHARLES WITKE

Exodus 32:7-14 | Psalm 51:1-11 | 1 Timothy 1:12-17 | Luke 15:1-10

It is probably familiar and even unchallenging to us when Jesus talks about sheep in his teaching parables. He does this a lot. The attention and care that they get can be reassuring until we realize that it is often we ourselves who are the sheep in the parables. Because objectively sheep are rather stupid animals. They need to be directed everywhere they go, in order to find food and water and the way home when darkness falls. They need lots of help, and repeatedly get lost and repeatedly have to be found. The Pharisees and the scribes in our Gospel text today are grumbling at Jesus for associating with tax collectors and sinners, social outcasts. Accused of keeping bad company, Jesus tells a story featuring a shepherd, in these critics' eyes, an outcast, another type of disreputable person. The rhetoric in his parable skillfully turns his critics into shepherds when he says, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep....?"....

The shepherd in the parable is a moderately well-off social outcast with his hundred sheep. Yet when one is lost, he seeks it. When he finds it, his joy is the great joy of one who has lost something of value, and finally found it. He gathers his friends and neighbors to rejoice over one sheep found, as heaven rejoices more over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine who need no repentance: this shows how far God will go to find us and reach out to us. The good news in this passage of scripture is that God actively seeks us out when we have wandered away, or are inattentive, or even get lost for a while. It is almost as if God is incomplete when we are missing. A missing sheep is valuable and vulnerable, and needs to be found.

There is a word of warning here, however. Jesus speaks of one sheep that strays and the ninety-nine who do not. He also distinguishes between one person who repents and the "ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance." When we hear this, we might want to hesitate before putting ourselves too quickly among the righteous needing no repentance. Some of the ninety-nine sheep who did not go astray that day will reliably on another day need rescuing because they are sheep. And Jesus assigns the same sheepish number, ninety-nine, to the righteous. Even if not lost today maybe one will be tomorrow. The distinction is between those aware of their need for repentance and those not aware that they have or

will have this need. So it may well be better for us to be a lost sheep who has been found, than to belong to the flock who mistakenly feel good about themselves, and count themselves righteous.

Our Gospel text today is from a very distant past, but its characters can still be found today: the respectable, like Pharisees and scribes, who hold themselves in high esteem, and on the other hand, the people on the margins of society who are condemned by the power structure. People who look down on others who are different from themselves are also distancing themselves from Jesus.

The Gospel today at its heart confronts us with two misleading notions: that repentance means some powerful and unique event, when it is actually more often principally a change of direction, turning from something; when we get lost, we change direction. That is repentance. We change our mind and outlook and values and priorities; it is a repeated shift out of the past that prepares us for a better future. Like sheep, we often get lost and are found by a loving God. The other misleading notion is that a conventional lifestyle can replace radical intentional following of God's will for us. These notions can mislead us into believing that we can never be one of the lost sheep. What if the ninety-nine righteous persons who believe they are righteous are mistaken? Those ninety-nine sheep escorted back to their sheepfold so their shepherd can go after the lost sheep might see one of their number get lost sometime soon. Maybe it's better to know you are a lost sheep who has been found and is reliably on the way home than mistakenly to number yourself among the righteous.

Christianity is loaded with paradoxes. God's mercy is one: When a sheep thinks he can find that greener grass on his own and wanders off, it is like is thinking we can do it all on our own, and that it is by our own strength and wisdom we are successfully navigating our journey forward. Let us be grateful that God is a shepherd with no common sense, who doesn't cut his losses and stick with the ninety-nine but rather cares enough to search the world in order to find a single lost sheep. What Rumi, the thirteenth century Muslim Sufi mystic and theologian said, holds true for us: "What you seek is seeking you."