

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost
September 16, 2007

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

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

Every now and a preacher hears or reads something that sheds a whole new light on a text they thought they knew how to preach. And sometime in the last year or two that happened to me with regard to the parables of the gospel today, especially the first one, about the lost sheep, and the shepherd who leaves the 99 to go and look for her.

Usually the way we preach this text is to focus on the shepherd and the one sheep and talk about how we sometimes are that lost one and how much God loves, us – enough to leave the 99 to come and look for us.

I went back to look at the last time I preached this text – and sure enough, that was what I did. I shared a story about how when Gretchen was about three years old she got separated from Nathan and I in a crowd. I talked about the power of the urgency to find a loved one, and how I found her by listening for her cry; and how repentance is really just the cry of the heart when we recognize we are lost, etc. etc. It was a pretty good sermon, if I say so myself.

But then, someone, I have no idea who or when or where – challenged us to think about this parable from another point of view. To think about this from the point of view of the 99 who are safe and sound in the sheep pen. Because, for us who feel right at home in a church pew on a Sunday morning, that is actually who we are most like. We might have been a lost one sometime in the past, But today, we are more like the 99. We are here together, brought here by the loving God who we trust to feed us, to care for us, to lead us into the right pathways of this life, and the next. But even so, we have a need, a need we share with the shepherd.

The shepherd goes to look for the sheep because the shepherd loves the sheep. The shepherd is not willing to give up on the lost one, the shepherd's life would have an emptiness without the hundredth sheep. So too with the 99. They are not complete without all the sheep who are part of the flock. Until the lost one is brought home – they have an emptiness too, a place waiting for the one who is lost. And so too with us. As a community we are not complete, because there are surely lost ones who God is seeking to bring home to this fold. There are, or at least there ought to be, spaces open to receive them home again.

That actually is a problem that comes up sometimes with close-knit groups of every sort: at work at school, in neighborhoods, even in churches. Sometimes they get so closely-knit there isn't any room for anyone new to get in. As a church, as the 99, we need to be especially watchful for that tendency, lest the lost ones comes looking for a home and don't find it among us.

I have been doing a lot of thinking lately about Emanuel, our ministries, our mission and our future. As many of you know, there was an article in the newspaper back in July about a development group that has bought up 12 acres around us with the intent to take

down old apartment complexes and build new condos and townhouses. If things go according to their plans, in the next few years, the neighborhood around us will change – drastically. The question that has been going through my head over and over is, ‘What then will it mean for us to love and serve our neighbor?’

And then, when I came to these parables again, one thing occurred to me. There is more than one way to be lost. I often think of the homeless people who come to the pantry, especially those who struggle with addiction or mental illness, or both, as the lost ones. Lost and lonely, and longing for a home. But there is more than one way to be lost. A person can be lost in the pursuit of success and wealth. They can be lonely and longing for a home even when they are nicely situated in a condo surrounded by treasures and toys. There is more than one way to be lost.

And there is more than one way to be hungry. We have been very focused on feeding the physical hunger of the people in our neighborhood. That has been entirely logical. Loving our neighbor and feeding the poor have been essentially the same thing. But people can be hungry instead for meaning for their lives, for participation in something bigger than themselves. People can be hungry for friendship, for a sense of belonging. There are all kinds of ways to be hungry.

There are all kinds of ways to be broken and in need to healing. There are all kinds of thirsts, all kinds of blindness. There are all kinds of ways to be dead to life and in need of a resurrection.

It just might turn out to be that as our neighborhood changes we will be reminded of a few very important things that are easy to lose track of amidst all the worthy activity. The most important resource we have to share is God’s grace. The most sustaining food we have to offer is the bread and the wine, body and blood of Christ. The most important identity that defines us is our baptism, as children of God, as the Body of Christ.

What caring for these other kinds of lostness and hunger will look like – I have no idea. But we can probably take a cue from Jesus. Just as in today’s text, Jesus was forever eating with sinners, hanging out with people, building relationships. What that will look like for us is yet to be seen. It kind of depends on who the neighbors are. (For a brief instant, thinking about an influx of young adults, I got this image of Ericson Hall as the site for a Friday night Dance – Dance Revolution party. Who knows.)

My hunch is the ministries of Emanuel will always involve caring for the poor – whether they are next door, or across town, or around the world. Maybe these ministries will also be the vehicles to accomplish a different mission, to create communities, to make spaces for lost ones to come home to. I don’t know. Time will tell.

I do know this. The shepherd who loves us all isn’t going to rest until all the lost ones are brought home. And the shepherd will use us to help do it. May we always be open to whoever God brings among us. And may we be useful to God in finding and welcoming those who are not yet home. Amen.