

UNITY IN GRACE

*Rev Jim Allan
Camrose United Church
12 September 2004*

Exodus 32:7-14 - The golden calf
Psalm 51 - Have mercy on me
Luke 15:1-10 - The lost sheep and coin

Today's passages of scripture centre on the grace and mercy of God. Psalm 51 is one of my all-time favourites, as I'm sure it is for many of you. It's that wondrous song celebration of the mercy of God. I don't know much Latin but the name of that one is one Latin word that I really like--*miserere*--the word for mercy. And the expression "create in me a clean heart, O God" has such a sense of the promise of the Gospel, that no matter how far we have wandered in our lives, the sacred has the power and the merciful will to create a new heart within us--clean and fresh and renewed and whole.

That story of the golden calf from Exodus also has a sense of the powerful mercy of God in an earthy, folksy, sort of way. These people wandering lost in the wilderness have turned to this golden calf, this idol, and God is just going to shut them down. Moses comes before God, and there is a human-like conversation when Moses persuades God to change his mind. Moses says "That's not how you want to be, God. You don't want to be just one of those mean Gods like all the others. You have mercifulness in you, and these people need another chance." God is persuaded, and turns in a way that I think has meaning in relation to those times during the early evolution of this understanding of this God. That was very different from the other Gods of the time. So we have this merciful, gracious God, and this theme of God's grace and mercy working, moving, wanting to create a clean heart in us, wanting to turn us around, wanting to bring us to wholeness.

And so Jesus offers this parable--two parables, but actually a set of three. They are about this lost-and-finding kind of thing, a returning sort of theme. The parable of the lost sheep is followed by the parable of the lost coin--the woman searching for her coin. The third parable is that of the prodigal son.

The scholars say it's unlikely that Jesus told all three together, because there are places in other gospels where they appear separately. But over the years people remembered Jesus' stories, collected them, and organized them into gospels. And so Luke's work came much later. But Luke chose for some reason to put the three parables together because they have a common theme portraying God's ways with us. Those ways are sometimes outrageous, such as the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine, just leaving them and going out looking for the one. That does seem a bit outrageous, this outrageous commitment to seeking us out, the way that father welcomed home the son who had shamed the family.

There's an interesting aside to this. A clear parallel exists among those three parables in terms of the common theme about God's ways with us. Traditionally in the church--and this is a little aside from the critique of Christian feminism--we have interpreted the shepherd seeking the lost sheep, as well as the father with the prodigal son, as God who seeks the lost or welcomes the lost when they return. The parable of the woman and the lost coin, on the other hand, has normally been interpreted as a little lesson for us about virtue, and that we should look for things when we lose them. In other words, the female image is seen as a

human image, whereas the male images are images of God. So the feminists have said “No, this is a set of three parables, and what we have here is a demonstration of Luke who was quite comfortable with using a woman as an image of God just as easily as the male images.”

We have a set of three parables, and the two that we are looking at today are about God’s ways with us seeking the lost. I have to comment an aside on this, too, because I’ve always had some trouble with the sheep and shepherd stories in the Bible. It’s such a prevalent metaphor for ministry in the church, and it does work to a certain extent. As you know, we call ministry “pastoral” ministry which picks up the idea of the shepherd with the sheep. Once when I was doing casual labour I had an opportunity to work on a sheep farm for a day, and I discovered that sheep are really, really, really stupid. So I always have a little trouble thinking of my congregation as a flock of sheep!!

The parable of the lost sheep is what I want to focus on, and it’s one of those very, very, rich images that can be interpreted on many different levels. I’m going to consider three different levels of interpretation that my mind goes through when I look at this parable. The first one is perhaps the most obvious. The parable ends by saying there is celebration in heaven when one sinner repents, and so repentance is a key idea. Repentance means “turning,” like the Greek word. It’s interesting that the word “return” is used--you know, the lost sheep is “returned” to the flock. It’s that sense of returning. And our faith has that dimension, certainly, talking about the people who have simply lost their way in life.

In a sense, this first level of interpretation is a moral level which has been common in the church. It refers to people who have just got lost in immoral living, and who need something to turn them around and to bring them back into the right way of living. And that “something” is a profound gift for people who have found that their lives are on dead-end paths, and who have then experienced the power of the gospel of God’s spirit to turn their lives around and set them on different paths. That’s what I was talking about last week when I referred to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s idea of “costly grace.” He was concerned; he was alarmed about the church falling into the tradition of “cheap grace” which he described as forgiveness without repentance. This cheap grace doesn’t give anybody anything because it doesn’t show them; it doesn’t express the power of God’s spirit to turn people’s lives around and to really make a difference in their lives. So the first level of the parable of the lost sheep is that very simple moral level--people’s lives turn around. What a celebration it is when that lost sheep returns!

As for the second level of interpretation, I begin thinking of it in terms of relationship and the community. The pastoral image has, of course, been used as an image of the church, the fellowship of faith. And so we have this sense of the church being the flock; and the people, the lost sheep, are the ones who have been lost from the church. The evangelical perspective uses that quite strongly to say that the church really needs to be not just tending the people within the church, but needs to be reaching out into the community and finding the lost sheep and bringing them back into the fold. In ministry, we have a debate about the extent to which a pastor should be working with the ninety-nine or off looking for the lost one.

We have little notes about lectionary sermons in the United Church, and they are printed in a publication called “Gathering.” I often read the notes about what somebody is suggesting for the lectionary. I don’t always follow them, but they often help me decide what I really want to say. The notes for this week suggest that if I as a minister were spending all my time out in the community looking for the lost sheep, and my flock was

feeling neglected, maybe I should preach a sermon about the ninety-nine--that I should preach about their anger and resentment about me, the shepherd, always being away. What about the ninety-nine? After all, they are here, too. And they get short shrift even in the biblical story which says there's more rejoicing in heaven if only one of those lost fools finds its way back, than over the ninety-nine who have always been righteous and fine.

That's not my experience with people, even the ones who are here every Sunday morning. So that's not what I decided to do as a topic for today's sermon. However, it did lead me to think about the relationship. We are a faith community, we're in relationship with one another, and we interact with one another in a way that touches each other and supports each other in our faith journey. So what happened to that one who wandered off? Why did that one wander off? Now here we can start being playful by doing all kinds of projecting our human stuff onto the one who wandered. We could think maybe he or she was just an introvert who needed a little alone time, or maybe was an adventurer looking for something exciting and different instead of the same old flock in the same old pasture, or maybe just wanted to be bad for once, or maybe got annoyed with the shepherd.

But as a church we do find ourselves pondering about why so many of the flock have wandered off--have left the church. Why have they left? What would the process be for people to come back into the church? I once saw a sign outside a conservative, evangelical church. It was a clever little quip. It was one of those sign boards with removable letters, and it said "What's missing from. . ." It looked like the word "church" was supposed to be there, but a couple of letters had fallen off--you know the way they do--and so it just had "ch," then a couple of spaces, and then "ch." And as one read the sign it dawned that what is missing from "church" is "ur." Isn't that clever? And I read it and I thought "hmm, cute"; and then I thought "hmm, wrong."

It's a self-righteous church that believes it is doing everything just fine, and that the reason people aren't attending is that something is wrong with them. And I realized, "No, I don't think that's the truth." I think there is something else missing from the church, and the church needs to have the humility to acknowledge it. We may not know what is missing, and maybe by talking among ourselves we never will discover what is missing. Maybe we'll discover that only by listening to the ones who have left, by hearing what their needs are that are not being met by the church. So perhaps when it returns, the lost sheep has something to say to the other ninety-nine because, if the church really is community, relationship, then what we are facing is a broken relationship between that ninety-nine and the one. We're talking about reconciliation, and isn't that close to the heart of the gospel? Repentance, mercy and forgiveness, are also about reconciliation where relationships have broken. So it points us toward thinking about the reconciliation that is needed between us--the ninety-nine who have stayed on--and the one who is lost. The proportion is somewhat different nowadays, I suppose.

Then I thought there's an even deeper level, a third level, at which to interpret this. As you know, I tend to be influenced by Jungian psychology. One of the things Jungians say is that many biblical passages can be interpreted as if they were dreams--in other words, by using the principles of Jungian dream interpretation to interpret biblical passages. Along those lines, a person with this dream would say that everything in the dream reflects or represents a part of him- or herself. So it really becomes a story about a part of ourselves lost. The inner journey of our faith--our soul work that is a lifelong journey taking different forms at different stages of life--can therefore be guided by this parable by our asking ourselves, "What part of me is lost and needs to be sought? Or what part of me is the spirit

seeking?” because the spirit of Christ works in us, in our faith communities, in our lives. And so the parable is really about how the spirit works in and through us. Each of us will have a different answer to that question when we sit down and do our meditation, our reflection--when we ask within ourselves, when we ask the inner Christ, to reveal to us what part of us is missing and needs to be sought out and restored and reconciled and heard within ourselves.

Let me give you a few examples of that sort of thing, although there must be about ten thousand different possibilities. For examples I'm going to use a comment someone said to me a long time ago--that people live their lives around the three fundamental fears of pain, loneliness or abandonment, and failure. What is the fear of failure? In a sense that's having lost the inner wisdom of God that shows us how to live. And so we compensate for that loss by acting self-righteous. We know people whose lives are all about achievement and impressing people, and who have compulsive drives to be successful. And yet people like that often have a deep sense that success is missing, because that is what drives them. No matter how much they succeed they still have that deep sense, that deep fear, of failure. What's missing in their lives is that wisdom of God that gives us the direction and the assurance of the way and the path so that we can take our lives one step at a time and know that we're living our lives according to God's wisdom.

People who fear death or pain are going to compensate for that by being obsessive throughout life about security and control. We know that kind of person. And yet no matter how much insurance they have, or how much wealth they have, they are still driven by the deep fear of insecurity. And what's really missing inside is that sense of God who cares for us and will always be there and sustain us no matter what happens in our lives.

Then there are those whose lives are driven by the fear of abandonment or loneliness. These are the people who compulsively control people around them, trying to make people love them, trying to be clingy, holding people close. And we know that kind of person. It's as if we just can't do enough for them, we can't care enough; they always seem to need more. And even though they seem to have thousands of friends and others around them all the time, deep down inside they still live with the fear of being alone, of being abandoned. What they are missing is that sense of God's love that is there in their hearts, so that even if they were completely alone they would still know that they are loved and accepted and belong in this beautiful world of our creator.

Those are just three examples of the kind of thing that is missing in everybody. Every personality has something missing, something that gets lost along the way, and there comes a time in our spiritual journey when we need to do that inner work of recognizing and reclaiming. But it's not something that we do alone. It's the spirit. The spirit is the shepherd. The spirit is working in us, in our hearts, constantly seeking the lost and working for that return to wholeness, seeking that inner reconciliation, that bringing-to-wholeness that we all seek in our lives. And that wholeness, whether in our hearts or our faith communities, and which we all seek, is the key to the peace and the serenity, the salvation, that real and deep experience of God in our hearts and wellness.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor