

“The Good Shepherd”
Genesis 48:13-16; Hebrews 13:20-21;
Luke 15:1-7; John 10:11-19

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He went out the door, quickly going down the path, looking back a little bit. He thought, “Boy, Father was in quite a mood this morning. Why did he keep wanting me to sit down at the table with him? He knew I had to get to the briar patch field. He knew I had things to do, places to go. He knew that I was going to be in charge of all the reapers that are coming today.”

He took off walking down the road. As he was walking along, he notices another fellow just coming in, carrying a sheep around his neck. He looked at him. “Poor sot. Looks like he’s been out all night looking for a sheep.” He wondered, “Is it really worth it going after that one sheep? If you make it through the season with most of the sheep—2 or 3, 4 or 5 lost—what difference does it make? As long as you get most of them through the lambing season, you still increase your flock and you don’t have to be out wandering around all night. Some of those sheep, I think, are expendable. It makes it easier. And that brother of mine, he was kind of like that. He was pretty expendable, too. I’m glad he’s gone. We finally have bought back the fields that we sold to give him his money so he could go. I hope he never comes back.”

We’re putting a couple of parables together, but as we imagine what the elder son may have been thinking about, one perspective as he thinks about his brother is perhaps he is glad he’s gone because he hasn’t lived up to what he expected or wanted or thinks he should have done, or that he took the money and ran, made them split things up. We talked about that a lot more last week.

One thing the elder son doesn’t quite realize is how close he is to being lost. Remember the story, what we often call the Parable of the Prodigal Son and what I say might be called the Parable of the Gracious Father, at the very end, we don’t know what the elder son does. Does he listen to the father and come in or does he let his anger overcome him? Does he get bitter and take off, and go off on his own without any support? How many friends would he lose along the way? As that elder son walks down the path to go to work, how far is he from being lost?

When Jesus is talking to the Pharisees, in many ways he is talking to people who have written other people off. They are just not holy enough. Jesus is there with the people that the Pharisees call sinners, the people they have written off, and so he tells the Pharisees this story about the Good Shepherd.

There are a number of challenges to them in this parable. The very first one is at the very beginning. If you have a lost sheep, what would you do? I wonder how many would have actually had the attitude of the older son and said, “Well, let me calculate. Do I need to go after this sheep or not?” He doesn’t give them that option. He says, “If you are a good shepherd, you go after the sheep and search for it.” That’s challenge number one.

Then, when you find it, there’s that joy in finding. There’s a little bit of a challenge there as well. Do we enter into the joy of finding more than the joy of just having? And then the whole thing comes together, I think, in the question of would you think a sheep was valuable enough to go find? What about a person?

When we moved to a small town in Colorado, my wife was talking with one of the leaders in the school and that person said, “If we can just get this present crop of high schoolers out of here,

then we can make the school into something.” She looked at him and said, “We don’t have any throw-away kids.”

The question Jesus asks is, “Do we have any throw-away people?”

I think looking at the elder son, for me, makes me think about how sometimes I think I’m on the inside and not with the throw-aways, but other times I’ve recognized how much I’m considered a throw-away. How much we need a God who cares for all of us, who is willing to invite and go after everyone. It seems almost extravagant, not economical to go after everyone, but I don’t want to be the one he doesn’t go after. Do you?

So as we see these parables, we begin to see something about the nature and character of God. None of us are expendable and God cares for everyone. Jesus says “I am the Good Shepherd.” It says something about the nature and character of God, a God who will come and cares about everyone, goes after all, invites all into the flock, wants everyone. That’s one of the things about the table. It’s open to anyone who will come and follow him.

The Good Shepherd brings us to a place where we can be sustained, fed. The thing I want to look at briefly is the Good Shepherd not only cares for us all, not only brings us all to a place where we can be fed, but then invites us to follow him, to be shepherds with him. It’s interesting to hear those verses out of Romans and Hebrews. The first one, out of Romans, was “We know in all things God works for good with those who love Him, those whom he has called according to his purposes.” Now, that’s a little different than most translations. You may have heard that before as “God works good for all those who love him.” This was the Good News translation, and it struck me, so I went back and looked at the Greek. There are probably some different manuscripts where you could go either way on this, but this makes so much sense to me that what God does is work for good with us, “with those who love Him.”

So as we are brought to the table, as we are made into the community, as we become a flock, as we recognize we have a Good Shepherd, we become part of the good of that Good Shepherd. In many ways, it’s the same thing that was said in Hebrews. “May the God of peace provide you with every good thing...” We often just like to stop there, I think. I’d like to have every good thing. But it goes on. “...every good thing you need in order to do his will.” So as we think about what it means to become one who loves God, it is one who then gets to become part of the good. I think that’s one reason mission trips are so incredible is because we do the good with God and we experience that.

So as we come to the table this morning, it is our Good Shepherd who invites us to come and be part of the flock, to be part of the community of faith, to be part of the body of Christ, that we might be part of the good God does. We are all invited.

Gracious God, we think about how you invite us to be part of the good that you do. You are the good one who shepherds us, guide us. Help us that we might see with eyes of grace as you do; that we might see a child of God, not an obstacle; that we might see a child of God, not a problem; that we might see a child of God that needs an embrace, not an object. Lord, as you have seen us and our need and offer to shepherd us, guide us to do the good that you would do through us. Through Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.