



Sermon and Prayers for March 30, 2025

Luke 15:1-7

This is a passage that often comes in a series of parables: The Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost (or Prodigal) Son. I like that, today, we get to dwell with the sheep and focus on this part of the story a little bit more than we do sometimes with all of the parables together. So many of the stories Jesus tells come down to the very human desire to want to know who is in and who is out. We want to be assured that we are in the “right” group, and to feel that assurance we need to know who is in the “wrong” group.

There is a cartoon drawing by a Pastor and artist named David Hayward that I think of every time I hear our scripture reading today. We see Jesus, carrying a sheep on his back, returning the sheep to a flock. Then, one of the sheep turns to Jesus and says, “Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Hold it right there! He wasn’t lost, we kicked him out!”

Some of us know in our bones what it is like to be the sheep that the flock kicked out. Maybe the flock was a church congregation that didn’t accept you as your full self. Or maybe it was something outside of a community of faith: family, or friends, or a different organization. This experience, of being the sheep that the flock rejects, cuts deep. It has the power to shift the trajectory of our lives, to make us question our identities and who we are. That is the place, I think, where we become lost.

We become lost when doubt starts to creep in that God could really ever love us exactly as we are. We become lost when we forget that we are made perfectly, beautifully, in the image of God. We become lost when we start to believe that we have made too many mistakes, one too many bad decisions, and that God’s grace is not enough to save us.

This is one of the reasons why, I think, our communities of faith matter. It is too easy for us, on our own, to start questioning God’s abundant and overflowing love for us. It is easy to lose track of the ways God has been, is now, and will be present with us. We need community—we need people who will remind us that God loves us, that God is holding onto us, that God will never let go of us. We need practices that ground us and challenge us, we need to know that we are not alone.

Still, our communities are not perfect places—our churches are made up of humans, and humans are messy, and sometimes mean, and often do things that we don’t really understand. Sometimes, our communities of faith get tied up in similar grumblings. Sometimes, we still really want to know who is “in” and who is “out”.

When we recognize this, when we pay attention to our tendencies to exclude and isolate, that’s when real change and growth can happen. This might mean stretching and changing, sometimes this means hard conversations about topics we’d rather not talk about. It might mean dealing with the harm that Church and Christianity have often caused in the world and imagining what we owe to those who have been cast out. And it means that we ultimately come together in rejoicing on earth like there is rejoicing in heaven, because we have recognized that our community of faith is incomplete when we fail to celebrate, not just tolerate and not just welcome, all who enter the doors.

I love that this scripture passage ends in rejoicing, and asks us to join in. There is rejoicing when someone, who thought God couldn’t possibly love them, sees God reflected in themselves. There is rejoicing when our communities embrace the diversity of God’s creation. There is rejoicing when someone who thought they were dead in sin receives the free gift of God’s grace.

There is a wonderful song by a group called the Highwoman called “Crowded Table”. There are a lot of parts of the song that I like, but the chorus is my favorite, when they sing, “I want a house with a crowded table, and a place by the fire for everyone”.

This is the vision that Jesus casts when he tells this parable, this is the vision God invites us to. When we join in God's table, it is a crowded one. It is crowded with our best friends and the people we don't agree with. It is crowded with people we've never met and with people we might think don't deserve to be there. Thank goodness, we are not responsible for making the reservations. At God's table, there is always room for one more.

When we receive communion in worship, sometimes we call it a Celebration of Holy Communion. It is, indeed, a celebration of this good news:

We cannot be lost from God. There is not a moment of our lives, from our first breath to our last, that God is not right next to us. Our words of forgiveness at the beginning of our service reminded us that no matter how far we wander, we can never wander outside the bounds of God's grace—we are loved, we are forgiven, we are never, not for one second, alone. All are welcome, all are celebrated, all are cause for rejoicing, at this very crowded table of God's. Thanks be to God.