

Sermon for September 15, 2019
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Luke 15:1-10
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

Holy Spirit, let these words be yours and let those who listen hear your voice. Amen.

Only in the Movies

I recently happened upon a unique web site called The Nostalgia Central Web, which lists things that happen only in the movies, including the following:

- It is always possible to find a parking spot directly outside the building you are desperate to enter.
- The Eiffel Tower can be seen from any window of any building in Paris.
- Plain or even ugly girls can become movie-star-pretty simply by removing their glasses and rearranging their hair.
- Anyone can land a 747 as long as there is someone in the control tower to talk you down.
- When a gun clip is emptied, the gun is tossed away.
- Running away from 25 armed and dangerous men will only result in a grazed leg.
- And, cars will explode instantly when struck by a single bullet!

Are these true? **Only in the movies!**

Sometimes reading the Bible is like going to the movies when we come across stories that really don't ring true. Why would anyone leave ninety-nine safe and healthy sheep to go look for a lost, troublesome one? Jesus doesn't think anyone would, which is why he challenges the Pharisees with the question, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one, does not leave the other ninety-nine to look for it?" knowing the answer is not any of them. And would a woman really have an "I Found My Coin" party? It seems unreal ... just like in the movies, when one person starts dancing in the street, and then suddenly everyone else starts to dance along with him. And they know all the steps to the dance and the words to the music! **Only in the movies!**

But we believe that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, so there must be some semblance of reality behind the lost sheep and the lost coin. Maybe instead of thinking of these events as things that could happen only in the movies, we can look at them as things that happen only in the gospels. The gospels, the Good News, more often speak what is God's truth than what is ours and show us how God acts instead of how we tend to act.

As today's passage from Luke begins, Jesus is crushed by a number of tax agents and other sinners who have come to hear him, upsetting the religious crowd, the "moral majority," so to speak, who have no respect or use for those who do not abide to the letter of the Law. With venom, the Pharisees and the scribes grumble, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:1-2). We aren't too surprised by that. The "righteous," those ninety-nine safe and saved sheep, are often quick to judge who belongs and who doesn't or decide what is right about worship and what is wrong with it, or what others in the church should or should not be doing. Jesus, of course, hears the Pharisees grumbling and uses it as a teaching moment for them, and for us, and as usual, there are two sides to the story.

Have you ever lost anything precious and priceless that you desperately searched for, and thank God, found? Do you remember how both the losing and the finding felt? When I was an English teacher and my children were both young, I had to find childcare. Our three-year old daughter, Kathleen, was enrolled in the UAH preschool and our son, Joseph, then in 2nd grade, went home after school with a mother who kept school kids until their parents got off work.

One afternoon after a long, stressful day, I swung into the driveway of this mother's home to pick up Joseph. I had already retrieved Kathleen who was safely belted in her car seat in the back of the car. She had just nodded off, and not wanting to wake her I made the snap decision to leave her in the car while I ran into the house and got Joseph, which, at tops, would take two minutes. I looked around to make sure there was no one walking in the neighborhood, and then I locked the car doors and went into the house.

Not even two minutes later we came back to the car only to find the backdoor open and Kathleen gone. I cannot even describe the terror and sickness that I felt as we searched the yard, the neighbor's yard, and all around the car. Where could she have possibly gone and who could have gotten to her so fast? Just as I tearfully asked the mom to call the police, the door to the house next door opened, and a lady walked out with Kathleen in tow. "Is this little girl yours?" she asked. "She just opened the door to my house and walked in, looking for her mommy."

Talk about the joy of finding that lost sheep! Talk about gratitude. I wanted to fall to my knees in thanksgiving. To this day, I have no idea how Kathleen managed to wake up, unlock the door, and get herself unbuckled in that short time, but she did, going into the wrong house, looking for me, her lost sheep. There was mutual rejoicing!

I never can read this lost sheep story anymore without thinking of that incident lo so many years ago. That incident made this story real for me, not something that happens only in the movies, or only in the gospels, but in our very lives. I believe that Jesus feels that same intense joy, that same gratitude, that same immense relief when one of his lost sheep is found and brought home.

Jesus feels more joy over the tax collector who repents than over ninety-nine self-righteous Pharisees;

More delight over the drop out who repents than over ninety-nine educated scribes;

More rejoicing over the addict who repents than over ninety-nine clean-and-sober Christians;

More happiness over the petty thief who repents than over ninety-nine law-abiding Americans;

More rejoicing over the lukewarm Christian who repents than over ninety-nine faithful brothers and sisters.

Is that possible? If it's in the gospels, then the answer is yes.

But Jesus isn't physically here to go hunting for lost sheep while we are well aware that they abound in great numbers. It is our job, as those called to go forth into the world, to actively seek those who are hurting, those who are hungry, those who are frightened, those who are grieving, those who may be different from us, and gather them up and bring them home. Worship *here* prepares us for the seeking that takes place out *there*. I think we get that. The challenge is whether we will do it. And if we shirk our duty, who will find these sheep?

But, as I said, there's a flipside to this story. With whom do we identify in this gospel lesson? The Pharisees? The tax collectors? The Good Shepherd? The ninety-nine happy, healthy sheep safely tucked in here at 3310 Danville Road? After all, we are actually at church. But, if we are honest, isn't it quite possible that each of us is lost in our own way, as well? Isn't it possible that we, too, from time to time tend to stray from the flock and from the loving watch of Jesus Christ? Couldn't it be plausible that our own self-righteous, our judgments of others, separate us from the flock? Might it be that the importance of getting our own way in life is so great that we don't mind cutting off the rest of the sheep? Could it be that envy or jealousy or bitterness or bias or close-mindedness or anger or fear or hurt or just plain selfishness have diverted us and we find ourselves suddenly out in the middle of the wilderness in our home, in our family, in our church, in our work, in our society? I think this little story cautions us about being too

smug in assuming right away that we are safe in the flock of ninety-nine. After all, it was the Pharisees that Jesus was addressing. Maybe it's time we, too, started heading back to where the Shepherd is looking so ardently and anxiously for us.

When the lost are found, Jesus finds pleasure; when the broken are healed, Jesus finds pleasure; when the sick recover, Jesus finds pleasure; when strained relationships become reconciled, Jesus finds pleasure; when those who did not know God discover God's love, Jesus finds pleasure; when the person we least thought belonged in church is included and cared for, Jesus finds pleasure; when we, like the shepherd, go out in search of those who need to be found, Jesus finds pleasure; and when we, lost ourselves, seek to return home, Jesus meets us on the way there.

Our God is one who loves us, longs for us to be in relationship with him, and rejoices when we accept. Yet he is also the God who isn't finished yet, who says, "My family isn't complete; my church isn't full; my work isn't done." Sisters and brothers, what only happens in the gospels is meant to happen now, with and through us. As forgiven Christians and members of Christ's flock who have received mercy and forgiveness ourselves, it becomes our joyful mission to seek the lost, the outsider, that person God has put on our hearts or in our paths and invite them home.

Thanks be to God.