

A GOD WHO MAKES HOUSE CALLS

(Luke 15:1-10)

Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep
And doesn't know where to find them.
Leave them alone and they'll come home,
Wagging their tails behind them.

That's perhaps the first nursery rhyme many of us learned as children. And if you have ever been lost - lost in a store, lost in a park, lost in a strange place - I'll bet you're glad Little Bo Peep wasn't your mother. Your mother and father, I do not doubt, or those who mothered and fathered you along the way, would not leave you alone but would go looking for you, high and low, and they would be as scared as you until they found you. God is like that mother, that father who loves each sheep, each child as if he/she were the only one and who at the same time loves everyone equally. Isn't that something?! Isn't that some kind of God?!

I remember a time once when I was lost. I was a little boy, and we had gone to the train station in Bay City to see my Uncle Ollie off to the war. There were a lot of people there, it was early evening and getting dark, and I got lost somehow, somewhere among the trains on the tracks. I started crying. A couple policemen came up, I told them I was lost, and before I knew it I was sitting on a tall box eating an ice cream cone (even more precious in those days than today). And before I finished the cone, my parents found me and the tears dried up and I didn't care about the ice cream anymore. I had just been lost...and found. I was so glad my parents didn't say, Leave him alone and he'll come home, Wagging his tail behind him. I did not know the way home from there. My mother's name was Esther, not Little Bo Peep. My God's name isn't Little Bo Peep either - it's shepherd, Good Shepherd.

Jesus tells two stories to help us see what God is like. In the first, God is the shepherd who notices that one sheep out of a hundred is missing and who doesn't calculate his percentages. I mean, 99 out of 100 isn't bad - on a T-F test, or as a quarterback or in the batter's box, or in your investments - 99 out of 100 isn't bad at all. But this shepherd doesn't calculate his percentages. He just knows that little Phil is lost in the big train station, and he's got only one thing on his mind - to find him. And oh, the joy when he is found - it ricochets all over heaven and earth, that joy.

In the second story, God is a woman - is that okay? is it okay for Jesus to describe God as a woman? - God is the housewife who loses a coin and can't wait for the kids to come home wagging their tails behind them before she goes looking for it. This story perhaps makes a bit more sense to us than the one about the sheep. For one thing, it's money that is lost, and we do know how to go looking for money. And it's not just one per cent but ten per cent - it's one of ten silver coins that's lost. And oh, the joy when this woman finds that lost coin - now she can relax and invite the neighbors over for a party, or at least for coffee and cookies.

What do we lose? Not sheep. Wallets - we lose a wallet sometimes...or a purse, and we panic for the money that is lost or the papers and cards (credit cards) in it. God says our wallets and purses are lost when their contents aren't being used to serve him and his purposes in the world.

What else do we lose? Career and professional people sometimes lose their appointment books. I had a colleague once who lost his for three days, and he was nervous the whole time, as if he had lost the remaining time of his life. God says our time is lost when it's not serving him and his purposes.

What else do we lose? A customer in an ice cream store asked the clerk what flavors she had. She whispered, "Vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry." The customer wondered about the whisper and said, "Do you have laryngitis?" She replied, "No, just vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry." She didn't want to say she had lost her voice. God says we have lost our voice when it's not serving him - at home, at school, at work, at play, and even at church.

God is like this woman, this shepherd. She goes seeking the lost: every individual is precious to this God. God is kinder than we are. God is not as calculating as we are - 10%, 1%. Out of more than 7.5 billion people, every single one is precious. You are... and you...and you...and you...and you. God loves you as if you were his only child, and he loves every one of us here, and out there, just as much. God is more outgoing than many doctors and some pastors today: God knows how to make house calls. God is vitally interested in every person...and will go to great lengths (Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Calvary, Galilee) to make them safe and free again. There is more mercy and forgiveness in God than there is in us. Here's even better news: there is more mercy and forgiveness in God than there is sin in us. Isn't that incredible?! But that's Jesus' point - and he went to great lengths to make it, he went to the cross to make it, to impress it on you and me, even this very morning.

And oh, what a kick God gets out of finding that one lost sheep! What do we get a kick out of finding - a contact lens on the volleyball court, a child in the woods, a 95-year-old grandfather? They found one out west some years ago - he'd been lost in the wilderness for two weeks and survived by eating berries. Do you think they were glad when they found him? God gets glad like that - isn't that something? To live in a world that has a God like that?!

This God is a funny God, gets angry with Moses and then changes his mind (Exodus

32:7-14), our first lesson today. God's grace is funny. It doesn't hit you over the head, usually, unless you're an alcoholic or an addict or some kind of criminal (then it might!). This grace just quietly and caringly keeps its eye on you. wonders what you're up to when you start to wander off, wonders where you're heading with that new interest, that new habit, tries to call you back from danger and disaster, sometimes succeeds (not always...it's crazy), even picks you up sometimes and carries you (as in "Footprints in the Sand"), carries you to where you can walk safe and free again.

It's a grace that isn't confined to this building, or the other like it in this town, but that seeps under your front door and into your workplace and onto your playing field and says: Don't worship Golden Calves - they are sure to disappoint you, and before long you'll find out how heavy they are to carry. But worship the Lord your God, who knows how to carry you, who brought you forth out of your mother's womb and who brings you forth out of your every Egypt, who brought from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ just to get your attention... and your commitment to his work of seeking and shepherding.

Jesus is God's search party, God's Son, our Savior - let's laugh with gladness when he finds us with his amazing grace. And let's learn to accept others as God does when he finds them - no put-downs of one another or of anybody out there or of the people crying for help at our border, only lift-ups, encouragements, deeds of kindness and patience, even house calls. That's our vocation now - not our irksome duty but our calling, the beautiful meaning of our life: to accept and nurture people and then watch them blossom and grow into the love that is offered to all by the God who made Jesus so beautiful.

We say that God is our shepherd who seeks us, saves us, and then throws a party. We say, Thanks for the party. That's what the church is. That's who we are, people who gather regularly to say Thanks for the party, people who are working with God to make the whole world one big party. And you know what? Our holy communion now is meant to be a foretaste of that feast to come.

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