

## The Reckless Shepherd

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*Luke 15:1-7 — Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “Who among you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.*

There are many different ways to be lost. One of the first that comes to my mind is a family lost on a road-trip — a recurring theme in movies, it seems. You know how it goes: there are cranky kids in the back-seat, and Mom is in the front seat, saying something like, “Honey, we should just stop and ask for directions,” and Dad, who is driving, adamantly retorts, “We don’t need directions — we’re not lost!” All the while, we the audience know that, in fact, they *are* lost, and this will become apparent to everyone in the family soon enough.

My own family took lots of road-trips when I was growing up, and I vividly remember a time on one of these trips when one person in my family got lost. My parents, two sisters, and I were making a 24-hour drive from Texas to North Carolina. I was probably 8 years old. We stopped at a gas station in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the day. Everyone got out of the car, went to the bathroom, got back in the car, and drove off — everyone, that is, except my sister Sarah, age 6. She had gotten out of the car and gone to the bathroom with the rest of us, but she hadn’t made it back to the car by the time we were rolling out. My vivid memory is of turning around in my seat, looking out the back window as our car was leaving the gas station, and seeing my sister with tears streaming down her cheeks, arms up in the air, and mouth wide open, shouting something none of us could hear. I remember her arms waving in a very weak and wilted way and her six-year-old body jumping up and down very slowly and heavily, as if her tears were draining all of the energy she had. I yelled, “Mom! Dad! We left Sarah!” And within a minute, the whole fiasco was over — very brief, but of course still very scary for my sister.

Sometimes, we’re lost in a geographic sense, not knowing where we are or how to get to the physical place where we want to be. Other times, we’re lost in a more personal sense, not understanding what’s happening around us or what’s happening to us. Sometimes, it takes us a while to learn, or to admit, that we are lost. Other times, we are confronted, assaulted by feeling lost in an instant. Sometimes, we’re lost for a few seconds. Sometimes for an hour. And some people feel lost for years and years. A loved one has died, and the emptiness inside is painful enough to disorient our daily life; we lose a job that we needed or a part of our job that we loved, and suddenly our sense of purpose is ripped out from under us; a desire or a habit has gotten out

of hand, and we've found ourselves being dishonest or hurtful to our loved ones, and we want to change, but we just don't know how. There are many, many different ways to be lost.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus tells a story about one lost sheep. It's an odd story, and I'll say why in a minute, but first, it's important to share what prompts Jesus to tell this story in the first place. At the beginning of our reading, Jesus is chatting with "all the tax collectors and sinners," the text says. Now, tax collectors, to put it bluntly, were regarded as thieves and traitors. They collected taxes for the Roman empire, so they were Jews who had sold out to a foreign, oppressive power, and they could easily charge their countrymen more than was necessary and then keep the change for themselves. In the eyes of pious Jews, tax collectors were in their own class of despicable people. As for who exactly these "sinners" were, we are left to our imagination. Elsewhere in the gospel of Luke, the term refers to prostitutes — poor, unmarried women who have few if any prospects for security and happiness. Whoever these "sinners" are, they are regarded as shameful and unclean by most Jews — and especially by the Pharisees and scribes. These respectable religious folk are quite upset to see Jesus associating with this shady crowd. Jesus notices their grumbling and then tells this parable, in hopes that all those who fancy themselves pious people will learn that there are not just many different ways to be lost; there are also many different ways to be a sinner.

It is an odd story, like I said. If you're like me, after hearing it, you probably wonder, "Would a shepherd actually leave 99 sheep in the wilderness, all alone, to go and look for just one who was lost? I mean, I don't know much about being a shepherd, but... Doesn't that seem a bit irresponsible? A bit reckless?" Apparently, even in the earliest years of Christianity, people were asking the same question. There's a very, very old text called the Gospel of Thomas, which contains stories about Jesus and many of his supposed sayings. And in that text, a version of this same parable appears, but in Thomas's version, the one lost sheep is described as "the largest and the most valuable of all." It seems that the ancient authors and editors of the Gospel of Thomas were themselves thrown off by this story, by the shepherd's seemingly poor judgment. So, they added this little detail about how grand this lost sheep was, in an attempt to rationalize the shepherd's decision.

But you know what? I think that we're supposed to be thrown off by what the shepherd does. We assume that a good shepherd is reasonable and responsible in caring for their flock as a whole. That's their job, their duty — not to pay any special attention to one or to several of them; just keep 'em all together, out of harm's way, and make sure they get enough to eat. That's it. But that's not the kind of shepherd Jesus is teaching us about. Jesus tells of a shepherd who doesn't just oversee the flock, but who keeps a close and caring eye on every single sheep. Jesus tells of a shepherd who is personally moved by love for each sheep — a love that is reckless, extravagant, self-giving. Jesus tells of a shepherd who passionately cares for the lost ones and who is desperate to see each one of them come back home.

One night, years ago, a couple of years before Sarah got lost on that road-trip, my mom was tucking her three kids into bed. As young kids, the three of us liked to have sleep-overs, so Sarah

and I would lay out our sleeping bags on the floor of our older sister Alyssa's room and sleep there. On this particular night, Alyssa and Sarah were quiet and seemed to be asleep already, and I was saying "Good night" to my mom, one-on-one. As she got up to leave, I stopped her: "Mom, do you love me best?" Taking a few seconds to collect herself, she said, "Oh, Bud, I love all of my children equally." A few more seconds of silence. Then I started to cry. "But who will love me best?" I asked. Years later, my mom told me that what she wishes she would have said is "I love you best. And I love Alyssa best. And I love Sarah best. I love all of my children best."

And so does God. Friends, God's love is not merely for the flock as a whole; God's love, God's best love, is for each individual person, no matter how lost they are or how lost they feel.

There are many different ways to be lost. But in all those ways, we can always be found by the God who is Love. We come to this table today to profess that the God of Love has found us and will find us again and again. May we draw near to this God today and every day. Amen.