

Hymns: 409: “Let us build a house where love can dwell”
 481: “The Lord’s my Shepherd, I’ll not want”
 571: “As your family, Lord, see us here”
 459: “Captain of Israel’s host and guide”

Readings: Jeremiah 18:1-11
 Luke 5:1-12

“WITH GOD NOTHING IS LOST”

In many places in the Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples and large groups of people through parables. And we just heard one of them, the parable of the lost sheep in Luke’s Gospel. Many people gathered to listen to Jesus. St. Luke reports that tax collectors and sinners, Pharisees and the Scribes were all there to listen to him. And Jesus presented them with three parables and the parable of the lost sheep was the first one.

This is a well-known parable and, in a sense, the point is quite simple: God is like a good shepherd who has a flock of a hundred sheep. When he loses just one of them, he leaves the others in order to go after the one that’s lost. When he finds it, he brings it back to the fold. It’s a simple point, really. Yet, looking closer, the parable has some interesting points worth looking at, and that’s what we’re going to do this morning.

Jesus begins the parable with a simple question. “Which one of 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?” If Jesus asked this question to you this morning, what would your answer be?

My answer would be ‘nobody!’ that’s because Jesus’ question doesn’t seem to make sense to me. Do you agree that the shepherd should leave 99 sheep in the “wilderness” until he finds one lost sheep?

I cannot agree with that, nor am I happy with the mathematics that this parable presents to us. If you have a hundred sheep and you lose one of them. It’s bad luck. That’s the cost of doing business. One sheep out of a hundred is an acceptable loss. It’s only one per cent after all. Not a big deal. Why can’t then this shepherd simply understand that 99 sheep are infinitely more valuable than one lost sheep? There’s no guarantee that he will find that sheep. If he can do the mathematics he shouldn’t have left his 99 sheep in the “wilderness”. For one thing, there is a safeguarding issue. What if wolves came and got those sheep while he was away? This is a serious failure in his flock management. You can’t put 99 per cent of your sheep in danger, in ‘wilderness’, in order to re-gain what’s been lost.

I'm not sure how this made sense to Jesus and his hearers, but if this shepherd was living in our day he wouldn't stand a chance. If his performance was independently assessed today, he might even lose his qualification as a shepherd. That's because, our value system is totally different.

When I was about 9 years old, a mathematics tutor used to come to our house once a week to teach me. I always called her the red pen teacher. That's because, she always corrected me with a red pen. I really didn't like mathematics and her red pen didn't help it. So on the day when my red pen tutor came, I used to put my hand on a warm kettle and then quickly to my forehead, do it a couple of times if necessary, and tell my mother that I was sick hoping that my mother would postpone the lesson.

The mathematics lessons usually started with very simple questions. I remember one lesson where I needed to put three different signs between numbers – equal, less-than, and greater-than signs. Not all the questions were simple to answer. But even, then, I knew that 99 should be shown as greater than 1.

This is my childhood memory, but this simple exercise of making comparison between numbers and their comparative values has been applied in many places in our lives and our society.

These days it's quite hard to live a day without hearing conversations around the political divisions and their consequences in our own time both in the post Brexit Britain and Europe and in the States with the new president. In the news, we hear about the terrorist attacks in Paris and other places. Austerity – that's also a word we hear so often these days in the media. Redundancy is another one. Thousands of people and families lose their jobs, their places to live, even their lives.

Of course, we try hard to overcome the divisions in the world and help those who feel lost in our society, but despite our efforts, in many places, we fail and we seem incapable of building a better world.

Some people say that we cannot afford having everyone in our society and we also hear that drawing more rigid lines on immigration will help us to build a safe and cohesive society. No matter whether we agree or not, this is what we have come to accept. Yet how different is the situation we find in the parable we heard just now! Is it then too much to say that this sounds as if we are trying to keep 99 sheep in safe hands while being ready to give up the one that's lost? Or are we trying to draw the line between those who are in and those who are out? Is the parable telling us that we are building our society or we have already built our society on a wrong value system?

As I was preparing this sermon, my thinking stopped at this point for a long time before I began to find an answer to these questions. The parable doesn't say that 99 sheep have more value than one lost sheep, nor does it say that one lost sheep is more precious than 99 sheep. If we are still comparing the two, we may be missing the point.

This parable is not asking us to put a greater-than or a less-than sign to show the relative value of those sheep. One lost sheep is as precious as the 99, even if it is a lost sheep. With God, every sheep counts. That's one of the main lessons we should draw from this parable.

The good news here is, no matter whether you identify yourself with the 99 or even the lost one, that with God, nothing is lost. That's the foundation of the kingdom of God. God and his kingdom know no division, no preference, and no giving up. Jesus told this parable not only to those who were respected and well regarded in his society, the Pharisees and the Scribes, but also to the sinners and the tax collectors, the marginalized, or more precisely much hated, in his society. The good news for them was that they are all equally important, each as valuable as any other, and precious in God's sight.

Few weeks ago, I went to preach to a congregation in Reading, there I preached on this same passage. After the service, I was standing at the door greeting people, shaking their hands, and trying to get their names right. One of the members came to me and said, "If I was the shepherd and one of my sheep was missing, I would have done the exactly the same as written in the Bible. I would leave the others and go after the one that's lost." It's always encouraging when people come to you after a sermon with few comments, questions, or even with different opinions. So, when she said this to me, I asked her why. She said to me that she would do that, because she owns a flock of sheep and she understands them very well. Sheep, by their nature, always wants to be together. So, if one of the sheep has been missing, she would go after it because she knows that there has been something wrong happened to that sheep. It could have been an accident or losing its own way. But no matter what happened to the sheep she knows that it wants to come back to the others and possibly waiting for the shepherd for help.

In this conversation, she helped me to see that this parable is not only about who God is and what his Kingdom is like, but is also yearning for our attention on who we are as the flock of sheep that God created us to live together and we, by our nature, too, are made to stay together.

We had Holocaust Memorial Day few weeks ago, a time for us to pause to remember one of the most tragic consequences of the divisions and violence in human history. Martin Niemoeller, a prominent protestant minister who spent his last eight and a half years in a prison and concentration camps is best remembered by his poem. I would like to share his poem with you this morning.

First they came for the Communists and I did not speak out
because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the Socialists and I did not speak out
because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out
because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews and I did not speak out
because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me
and there was no one left to speak out for me.

In our deepest being, God created us to live together, to love one another, and to speak out for each other when trouble comes.

In the parable of the lost sheep, we are given a beautiful picture of how God's kingdom works. God, our shepherd, loves all of us with the same love. He finds us in places where we get lost. In his Kingdom, everyone speaks out for each other even if it means putting their own lives in danger. That's what's happening here in the parable. The 99 sheep are taking risks by being left alone in the wilderness without their shepherd, in order to save the one that's been lost. There is a trust that their shepherd will bring the lost one back to them. This is the way that the shepherd and the sheep hold their kingdom together. In their kingdom, there is unity. No one is lost. With God, nothing is lost.

Here is an invitation for all of us, the invitation to know God's love, to love one another, and to build our society upon the trust on this unfailing and never giving-up love of God so that we can grow into unity with each other and with God.

St. Paul, puts this kingdom beautifully in his letter to Romans, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8)

Let this good news be true in our lives and our society this morning. With God, nothing, no one, is lost.

Amen.