

LOVE SOAP

Sermon for Pentecost 17C, Proper 19: Lk 15:1-10

LPC, 9/11/16

In a past life I spent a single school year teaching preschoolers at an establishment that had a lamentably casual attitude toward the laws that keep a requisite number of adults on hand for the number of children present. On one occasion I found myself the only adult on the playground with the ten children from my own class of two-year-olds. Kids this age can move very fast and I was constantly counting and recounting them. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10. 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9----what? I counted again and sure enough one of the children was missing—every teacher’s nightmare. There was no way I could leave the nine to look for the one, so I abruptly cut short their recess and herded them into the building so the already overextended teacher of the fours could mind my nine while I searched for the lost one.

All ended well, thank God. The delinquent had quietly returned to our classroom on his own to lie down. He was fine. Meanwhile I probably lost a year of my life.

But I tell this story to make a point about the familiar parable we heard again this morning. Most of us have heard this story so often that it may escape our notice that to leave ninety-nine sheep to seek one that is lost is utterly ridiculous and patently irresponsible. Any human attempting this action would be promptly cashiered by his or her employer.

Which one of *you*, having a hundred sheep and losing one would seriously leave the ninety-nine in the *wilderness*, and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? I very much hope not one of you would do such a stupid thing! If I had left nine children to go after one I can only imagine the lawsuits, if not the criminal penalties, that would have ensued.

As for the woman who throws a party to celebrate finding her lost money, this is equally absurd. She might easily spend more than the value of the coin to entertain all of her friends and neighbors.

This excerpt from Luke that we just heard stops just shy of the most famous Lost-and-Found story in the Bible, which immediately follows this one in context. That famous story is of course the story of the Prodigal Son, where the wronged father stages a royal welcome for his appallingly undeserving son while his “good” son goes unrewarded.

When you stop to think about it, however beloved that story is, it too is ridiculous. Surely, in real life, a child who has messed up his life so spectacularly would be allowed to come home only under certain conditions, like: you will contribute to the family economy. You will respect yourself, your family, and the house rules. You will attend AA. And if I find drugs in your underwear drawer I personally will be the one to call the police. That would be the sensible way for the father to behave. I daresay that that might even, ultimately, be the most loving thing a human father could do under the circumstances.

Jesus of course builds his parables around people in situations that would be understood by his audience. But the fact is that good, sensible people do not and possibly should not behave like the people in Jesus’ Lost-and-Found Parables.

Remember I told you that the section of Luke we are in right now is full of tough teaching and problem parables. Do not be deceived by a quaint mental picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd with the lamb in his arms. The actual circumstances of a shepherd carrying a sheep itself has a brutal history. Evidently when a sheep was a chronic runaway, the shepherd would deliberately break its leg, and carry it until the leg healed, thereby curing the sheep of its wanton habits.

These Lost-and-Found stories in historical context are bizarre, even shocking. Jesus meant them to be. As I've said the last two Sundays, Jesus is following a rabbinic pattern of exaggerating the details of a story to get people's attention. Does he have yours yet?

Let's hope so. Here's the payoff. These stories are not about what real people do, nor even about what real people *should* do. These are not moral stories—not fables that end with “Go ye and do likewise.” These are theological stories. They don't tell us about ourselves. They tell us about God.

And here is the main thing about God, when it comes to forgiveness. God is not like people. People typically behave in certain predictable ways when they have been wronged. They may be angry. They may punish, or exact revenge, or seek recompense. They *may* forgive, while taking steps to make sure they are not taken advantage of a second time. (This is not such a bad idea!) Finally, they may give up on the person who has wronged them, cutting ties, cutting losses, writing off the relationship, however regretfully, because being a doormat is no way to live. Every human has his or her limits.

Not so with God. God does not stay angry or exact revenge. God's forgiveness is unconditional in situations of sincere repentance. God *never* gives up on any one of us. God forever hopes that we may turn from the hurt we cause, repent and turn back to God. God's love and capacity for forgiveness, unlike ours, are limitless.

As God forgives us, God does call us to be forgiving too. Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive our sins as we forgive.” The fact is, we can never hope to forgive exactly as God forgives. As I said, God is limitless, we are not. But God forgives even our limitedness.

God's love and forgiveness are readily available to us, through Jesus, when we have Jesus into our homes, so to speak, as the tax collectors and sinners did in today's Gospel passage. The Pharisees and the scribes had it all wrong. They thought the evil history of the sinners would make Jesus unclean, whereas it was the love and forgiveness of Jesus that made (and makes) the sinners clean. Think of love as soap. Love erases sin as soap erases dirt. Here's a visual to help you remember this: Love Soap.

This is the thing about love, even imperfect love like our human love. Love cleanses. When we love another enough to forgive, our love cleanses not only the one who has wronged us, but ourselves as well. Conversely a sin retained continues to stain, not only the sinner, but the one who fails to forgive the sin. Forgiveness is not something we do for the sinner, it is something we do for ourselves.

Use your Love Soap, forgive, and be clean, by the love and forgiveness of God through Jesus.