

SHEPHERDING FOR DUMMIES

Luke 15:1-7

July 16, 2006 – Pentecost 6 [B]

A few months ago – back in early May – an employee of the Veteran's Administration violated agency policy by taking home a laptop computer which contained the unencrypted PERSONAL DATA [Social Security numbers, etc.] of 26.5 million VETERANS and CURRENT military personnel. The employee MEANT WELL – to catch up on some work at home – but that night someone broke into the employee's home and STOLE the computer.

The theft set off a MASSIVE search to recover it – because everyone feared that the thief would tap into the information and use it to steal someone's "identity". But fortunately, after an intensive search, the computer was recovered on June 29th – and so far there has been NO evidence that the data was tampered with.

I wonder this morning – have YOU ever lost something IMPORTANT? Something of VALUE? I recently spoke with a man – a man who had grown up during the 1930s in the heart of the Great Depression. He told me of how hard it was for his family to get by – how each member of the family had to work to help the family survive. He told me of the PRIDE he felt when he got his FIRST JOB – and how HARD he worked to earn 50 cents – the FIRST 50 cents he had ever earned – which doesn't sound like MUCH, but in the middle of the Depression, the "buying power" of 50 cents was like \$50 today! He told me of the EXCITEMENT he felt when was paid. But on the way home the coins slipped through a hole in his pocket and were GONE. He told how he SOBBED when he realized what had happened.

So – have YOU ever lost something VALUABLE? Chances are – we ALL have; but what did you DO about it when you realized it was MISSING?

The Scripture for this morning – it's about LOSING and SEARCHING FOR something VALUABLE that's been LOST. Jesus has been teaching in the towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee. His reputation as a great teacher and healer has been well-established. And because of this - **people from ALL walks of life are being drawn to him.**

Among those who are drawn to Jesus are RELIGIOUS people like Nicodemus and Jairus – leaders who are highly-respected in the eyes of everyone. But also among those coming to see Jesus are people we can only call "undesirables" – people whose livelihoods were considered

“objectionable” or “offensive”. Joachim Jeremias is a German scholar, an authority on life in Israel in the 1st century; he discovered that some of these “despised” occupations included such occupations as:

- camel drivers
- tanners
- weavers
- tax collectors
- prostitutes

What’s INTERESTING is that **Jesus receives ALL those who come to him** – but Luke [LK] makes a special point to mention that Jesus “welcomes” these “undesirables” – and by “welcome”, LK means that **Jesus not only GREETs these people – he actually INVITES them to join him for dinner!**

But this doesn’t SET WELL with SOME of the religious authorities. They are DEEPLY TROUBLED by Jesus’ actions – for the SAME reason OUR mothers are concerned about the “company” WE keep: *“Birds of a feather flock together”*. The religious leaders KNOW that the Psalms [especially Psalm 1] WARN us: *Blessed is the one who does not follow the advice of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers*. These religious leaders KNOW that associating with people with questionable lifestyles is RISKY: while Jesus may have the BEST of intentions – the religious leaders know that instead of changing THEM – he runs the risk of THEM changing HIM! So – word gets back to Jesus: **the scribes and the Pharisees are NOT HAPPY with your behavior!**

Now – how do YOU respond when someone says something BAD about you? When Jesus hears about their concern, he responds with a QUESTION [our “question of the day”]: *If you had a hundred sheep and one of them wandered away and got lost in the wilderness, wouldn’t you leave the ninety-nine others to go and search for the lost one until you found it?*

Now – I don’t know about you – but when I hear this question – my FIRST response is: I don’t think so! This doesn’t make sense! No shepherd would risk the welfare of 99 sheep that are “safe and sound” to go search for ONE that wanders off and gets lost. Can you imagine a school teacher leaving a room full of kids to chase after one who decides to walk out of class? When the teacher returns – that classroom would be CHAOS!

And in the same way – **NO shepherd would ever leave an entire flock to go after a single sheep**. If they did – they’d be sent back to school and forced to read Shepherding for Dummies!

So – WHY does Jesus ask this question? Let's be CLEAR about something: **Jesus isn't trying to give us lessons on "how to shepherd";** he knows ALL about shepherds!

But remember that Jesus is being CRITICIZED for his association with "sinners" – so **what Jesus is doing is EXPLAINING his actions in a way that everyone would understand – by using language about "shepherds" and "sheep".**

Of course, shepherds and sheep were a part of everyday life in ancient Israel – but **"shepherds and sheep" was also the LANGUAGE Israel used to talk about God and its relationship to God.** Throughout Israel's history, God has been a caring "shepherd" for Israel:

- Psalm 23 – *the LORD is my "shepherd"*
- Psalm 95 – *we are God's "flock", the sheep of God's pasture*

But even MORE importantly – when the "sheep" go "astray" – as Israel OFTEN does – the LORD seeks out Israel and picks her up and brings her back into the "fold":

- Isaiah 53:6 – *All of us, like sheep, have gone astray; each of us have gone our own way*
- Ezekiel 34 – *I will seek out my lost sheep, says the LORD, and bind up their wounds*

Every Jew KNEW this – so when Jesus asks a question about a shepherd seeking lost sheep – he's letting people know – I'm not carelessly hanging out with "undesirables"; I'M ON A MISSION. MY FATHER AND I ARE ONE – we're on the "same page" – and just as God's mission has been to seek out and find the "lost" – it's MY mission, too.

And at the HEART of this "mission" is the awareness that **EVERY person is VALUABLE to God** – and if you LOSE something of "value" – you go looking for it. If you're a "shepherd" and one of the "sheep" gets "lost" – you GO FIND IT! That's what God has ALWAYS done with Israel – and that's what Jesus is doing too – and **the ONLY way to seek out the "lost" is to get personally involved.**

Of course – **seeking out "lost sheep" can be RISKY.** Shepherds in ancient Israel always had to be on the lookout for lions and bears when they took their flocks into the wilderness. And when a sheep wandered off from the flock and realized what it had done – it became so PARALYZED with fear that it couldn't move. The shepherd had to carry this animal – 80, 90 pounds – across the shoulders, up and down hills. Looking for "lost sheep" was HARD WORK.

But all the trouble was WORTH it when a shepherd found a lost sheep and safely brought it home again. It was something to CELEBRATE. And Jesus says **when one of GOD'S "lost sheep" is "found" and comes "home" – there is joy in heaven.**

In the movie "Traffic", Michael Douglass plays the part of Robert Wakefield, a distinguished federal judge who is tapped by the President of the United States to become the nation's "drug czar". His job will be to lead the war against drug trafficking.

But unknown to Judge Wakefield, his daughter – who attends an expensive prep school – is introduced to drugs by some of her "friends" at school. At first she sells her "toys" – her I-Pod, her cell phone – to pay for her habit. But her addiction gradually becomes so powerful that she begins to steal from her parents. And when the craving gets even stronger – she begins to SELL herself in prostitution to pay for drugs. She eventually winds up in a ghetto being used by a pimp.

When Judge Wakefield realizes he's lost his daughter to drugs – hee goes searching for her – even though his search puts him at great risk. But **his love for his daughter is so strong that all the risks mean nothing.** Finally – he finds her and scoops her up in his arms and takes her home – and helps her fight the addiction that is destroying her life.

Brothers and Sisters – **God values EVERY person.** He values YOU and he values ME – but please understand: he values the girls at Danny's and drug addicts JUST AS MUCH. We as a congregation need to always keep in mind that if our mission, our vision, our values, our policies DON'T value others and seek to help them find their way "home" – then they're worthless.

Jesus ate and drank with sinners because he was doing some "shepherding". He sought out and risked personal involvement with "undesirables" because deep down inside he knew they were God's "lost" children too. He involved himself in the risky, hard work of seeking out those who wander away from God because when even ONE is "found" – it's cause for a REAL celebration.

Jesus was committed to seeking out the "lost". We must be, too.

Let us pray....