

Sept 15 Sermon: Everyone is Important

This is one of the most picturesque, beautiful and truly wonderful passages in all of the gospels. Joy is mentioned five times in this passage. First the shepherd rejoices, then he calls together a party for everyone to rejoice. Then there is joy in the presence of God over sinners repenting. Then the woman with the lost coin calls her neighbors to rejoice together and then there is Joy in the presence of angels over one sinner repenting.

Jesus spoke so strongly of joy because he was in direct opposition to the official position and social conduct of the Pharisees, who led the complaint department in this passage.

The text indicates that Jesus habitually welcomed, accepted, cared for and enjoyed the company of sinners and tax collectors eating with them on both regular and feast days. Also as the gospel progresses the crowd of sinners and tax collectors around Jesus is growing. The Pharisees and Scribes also habitually complained, carped, gossiped and whispered among themselves, about this, and the growing crowd did not help.

This for them was a consistent ethic, since they had a saying that said, "There is joy before God when those who provoke him perish from the world" (and what they mean of course and often we mean, is people who provoke us, we also assume would provoke God, and wouldn't it be nice if God took care of them for us. By destroying them.) Instead Jesus says the Son of man came into the world to save sinners. That means to heal, save from danger and make whole. To refresh, renew and restore. This picture of the good shepherd is more dynamic than its parallels in Matthew and John. Only here, in Luke, does the shepherd carry the sheep on its shoulders, and here Jesus says what man of you would not look for your lost sheep until you find them, the search does not end until the person is found. The passage draws its dynamism from its three parable context of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost Son. All driving home the same point in wonderful and dramatic ways. The early church used to say that the first one represented the Son, looking for those who had wandered off into the wilderness and were too weak to return on their own. The second parable was considered a parable of the church, referring to those lost in the house of God, and then guided home by the Spirit and the last parable, the prodigal son illustrated God the Father seeking and loving those who had wandered truly far off. These themes are played out all the way through Luke, when Jesus saves the thief on the cross, and right into the resurrection appearances when Jesus walks beside the Emmaus road disciples and breaks bread with them, and they recognize him. This theme continues into the book of Acts when Jesus tells them to go into all the Jerusalem, Judah, Samaria and all the world. As Acts unfolds, Greek speaking Jews, Gentiles, Roman Soldiers, sorcerers, jailers, leather tanners, women, children, and an Ethiopian Eunuch are all brought into the fellowship of God's people. In our world when division rules the day because people want exclusion instead of inclusion this a striking parable. The theme of this passage is so strong in Luke that many in the early church believed that the first picture of Jesus ever painted was the good shepherd, and that Luke was the artist. Whether that is true or not Luke artfully depicts Jesus as the good shepherd seeking the lost. It is an apt image. In one of my first churches I was in Idaho and we had many shepherds there. I remember one well, his name was Paul Conway. He was born at the turn of the century and lived in the wilds highlands on the border of Nevada and Idaho as a shepherder.

One day he told me a story of how "I saved the sheep" He said it was sheering time. You drove the sheep to an area where they were all sheered, and the wool was gathered. When his flock come up the sheering pen he hesitated. Paul said I just didn't feel right about the weather. The shepherd behind him became impatient and told Paul to get moving. Paul said, "I wouldn't if I were you. It seem like a storm is coming". The other shepherd was worried about deadlines, Paul was worried about the sheep. In response to my curious look he said, they can take a terrible cold, when they have the wool on. The fellow told Paul to either bring his sheep through or get out of the way. It was a sunny clear day, but Paul said, "I drove them to a low valley. I gathered them all together, and kept them out of the wind, with the wool on, That night a terrible storm came through. It was awful. Thousands of sheep died. Shepherds lost large portions of their flocks. But mine were alright. That was the night I saved the sheep. Because I just knew what I had to do.

Jesus knows what he has to do, what is mission is, but what he wants to and what he wants to do is seek and save the lost. He seeks us until he finds us because he loves us and enjoys us. This night and every night he will save us. Let us rejoice in the kind heart of the good Shepherd.