

“One in a Hundred”
Luke 15:1-10
14th Sunday after Pentecost

August 29, 2021
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Some of you have pointed out to me that I typically have two ways of ending a sermon.

One is with Amen.
And the other way is with...no Amen.

Y'all are very observant. You've got me figured out.
So today, I'm going to mess with the formula.
Instead of one Amen, or no Amens...I'm going to give you
THREE Amens.

Just want to keep you on your toes: watch for the three Amens.

Because the first one will be directed to those people in these pews who know what it's like to be afraid of losing something or someone important. Has that ever happened to you?

One day a number of years ago, I managed to put an unintentional twist on the experience of forgetting where you parked your car. Has anyone else ever forgotten where they parked their car before?

I was in a fender bender.
No one was hurt, but there was damage.
So I called our insurance company, they gave me the name of a body shop, I took the car there.

Two days later, I got a call from the body shop:
“When are you dropping off your car?”

“I dropped it off two days ago.”

“Uh, sir, we don’t have your car here.”

“UH...YES YOU DO!”

“Well, sir, what’s it look like?”

I described the car, the receptionist went to look for the car, she came back and told me, “There’s no car here like that.”

“Ma’am,” I said, “this is about to get very serious very quick. Are you telling me you LOST my CAR?!!”

She went searching again, again no car.

I was just about to head down to the body shop to see for myself, when I overheard the manager shout out to the receptionist:

“I just called Autoplex. His car is over there!”

Now this was more than a little embarrassing.

I took the car to Autoplex, but I thought I was taking it to Quality Collision, since they were both right next to one another.

And I apologized profusely...but I was relieved.

My car had not been lost.

Do you know about this?

What it’s like to find something important that’s been lost?

Even more emotional when that something is a SOMEONE...

Following the horrible news of the recent earthquake in Haiti, I was reminded of something that happened in the aftermath of the previous earthquake there...the one that occurred 11 years ago, back in January of 2010.

It was couple months after that devastating event.

NBC did a story on children in Haiti who had been separated from their families during the quake.

Reuniting these children with mom or dad was particularly difficult for aid workers, because a) those young kids didn't always know their own street address or phone number, and b) the landscape of Port-a-Prince was radically changed. Some parts of the city looked very little like they did before.

But one UNICEF worker got an idea.

She suggested that some children she was helping take a crayon, and draw a map of their home.

Sterling, who was 6 years old, drew a small building—
that was her home—
and then a church—
and then a bunch of small bumps,
with crosses on them.

What's this, asked the UNICEF worker?
It's where they bury dead people, Sterling replied.

Well, the worker sprang up, popped Sterling in her vehicle, and took off for a nearby cemetery, one she had passed countless times before.

As they got closer, Sterling got more and more animated.
Finally, Sterling pointed to a path in the rubble.
This path led to a clearing of sorts, and just beyond were people.
As they made their way forward, Sterling was greeted with shouts of joy all around!

There was Sterling's aunt! There were neighbors! A phone call was made, and before long, Sterling's father came running up to greet his daughter.

“I’ve been walking everywhere, looking for you!” he cried.¹

Do you know what this is like?

I remember vividly when we lost our dog—not our current dog, our previous dog—how it felt when we were searching for her, how it felt when, after many hours, we finally found her.

The panic of losing something that you just can’t lose.
The joy of finding someone whom you thought was gone for good.

But it’s also true that sometimes we don’t get that joy...

The journalist David Sheff wrote a book a while back about the struggles he faced trying to help his son through his son’s drug addiction.

“When my child was born,” Sheff writes, “it was impossible to imagine that he would suffer in the ways that Nic has suffered...

Sheff admits that he doesn’t know what Nic’s future will hold.

But he goes on to affirm that even in the most chaotic moments, “...it is possible to love a child who is...possibly [lost] forever.”²

This is why I believe chapter 15 in Luke’s Gospel contains three of the most important stories in all of Scripture.

¹ As told by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, in his sermon “Take Your First Right at the Cemetery,” April 4, 2010, at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, New York.

² David Sheff, *Beautiful Boy: A Father’s Journey Through His Son’s Addiction*, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008.

We heard the third story last Sunday.
We heard the first two today.
Stories of lost and found.

Jesus says that if someone you love has been lost, God will find them.

Jesus says that when it comes to the lost, God will stop at NOTHING to go get them.

I will hang my hat on the truth of these stories.
Even if it doesn't happen in this lifetime...that won't stop God.
Nothing will get in God's way, not even death, when it comes to finding God's children.

It is the good news of the gospel.
It is the source of God's greatest joy.

End of parables.
End of sermon.
Amen.

In case you've forgotten, that's the first Amen, but it's not last one, because the curious thing about the parables we heard today is where we place ourselves when we hear them.

If you're anything like me, it's really easy to hear, say, our first parable, and assume that you're one of the 99 sheep. I'll just speak for myself. I enjoy imagining that I'm part of the 99.

I like thinking that I'm able to be left alone with the other 98, able to be responsible and do what's right with the other 98, right up until I get to the last thing Jesus says in our text:

“...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Wait—what?

99 righteous persons who need no repentance?

Who is Jesus talking about?

Does anyone among us truly believe that we need no repentance?

I like to think I’m one of the 99, but I also know I need repentance, but if I know I need to repent, then I can’t be part of the 99...

So...the SECOND AMEN in this sermon—is directed toward those of you who know there’s not a day that goes by when you don’t need to repent. And I want you to do something.

One of the pillars that I’ve mentioned the past couple of weeks that is a part of Westminster’s DNA, part of my vision here, is imagination.

So let me invite you to imagine the FACE OF JESUS when he started telling these parables.

What was the expression on his face?

Was he dead-set serious and earnest when he mentions the “99 who need no repentance”?

Or can you see a twinkle in his eye?

What if Jesus is being ironic when he makes this statement?

What if Jesus talks about “the 99 who need no repentance,”

with a smile on his face,

knowing full well that **there is no such group of people...**

And if there is no 99,

then that means that any one of us, on any given day,

just might be the sheep who gets lost!

In Judith Guest's novel, *Ordinary People*, Calvin Jarrett is a 41-year-old tax attorney facing a mid-life crisis. He has a family, he has a career, but he doesn't really know who HE is. Sometimes he'll find himself within earshot of someone saying, "Now, I'm the kind of man who..."—and whenever he hears that, he hopes to garner some wisdom for himself.

He tries to apply what those people say to his own life.
I'm the kind of man who...

And yet, as Calvin reflects back on his life:
the loss of his mother when he was only 11 years old,
the loss of a mentor later,
a poor hiring decision he made at his company...

Calvin is finally forced to admit:
"I'm the kind of man who...hasn't the least idea what kind of man
I am."³

He looks like he belongs with the 99!
But Calvin Jarrett is lost.
Have you ever known what it's like to be lost?

**What if Jesus is saying it can happen to anyone, at any time, in
any number of ways?**

A few years ago, a professor at Duke wrote the following:

*When we moved to North Carolina..., we were thrilled to be
moving to a city with a great school system. We found a diverse
neighborhood, filled with families. Everything felt good, felt right.*

³ Judith Guest, *Ordinary People*, New York: Penguin Books, 1976. I am indebted to an article by Thomas G. Long, "Preaching Psalms in Lent," in *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2014, for calling my attention to this citation from the novel.

After we settled in, we went to one of the friendly neighbors, asking if their daughter and our daughter could get together and play. The mother, a really lovely person, reached for her phone and pulled out the calendar...She scrolled...and scrolled...and scrolled. She finally said: “She has a 45-minute opening two and a half weeks from now. The rest of the time it’s gymnastics, piano, and voice lessons. She just...so busy.”

How did we end up living like this? Dr. Safi asks.

Why do we do this to ourselves?

Do we have to love our children so much that we overschedule them, making them stressed and busy—just like us?

I saw a dear friend a few days ago. I stopped by to ask her how she was doing...She looked up, voice lowered, and just whimpered: “I’m so busy...I have so much going on.”

The disease of being “busy,” Dr. Safi concludes, “...is spiritually destructive...It saps our ability to be fully present with those we love the most...and keeps us from forming the kind of community that we all so desperately crave.”⁴

Did you know that getting lost can happen to anyone, at any time, in any number of ways?

Let me invite you to think for a moment about that part of your life where the wheels are off right now.

That part of you that feels helpless, alone,
scared, confused...

⁴ Omid Safi, “The Disease of Being Busy,” November 6, 2014, found at [The Disease of Being Busy | The On Being Project - The On Being Project](#).

that part that makes you feel like you're the sheep
in the wilderness,
by yourself...

Then listen to the good news of this parable:

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine...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.”

It's tempting to picture ourselves as one of the 99...but remember:

The sheep that is all by itself in the wilderness,
with no control over what happens next in its life—
THAT is the sheep that ends up on the shoulders of Jesus.

Carried by Jesus to get where that sheep needs to go.

Amen.

In case you've lost track, that's the second Amen.

And as I said, the curious thing about these parables is where we place ourselves when we hear them.

With the 99 sheep or the 9 coins?

 Tempting to see ourselves that way.

With the lost sheep or the lost coin?

 It could be that way ANY day...

But what about with the shepherd?

Do you think that Jesus wants us to see ourselves as the shepherd?

Our THIRD AMEN...is going to be for those of you who know that Shepherd, who know you are a part of God's Church, the body of Christ.

What if...at this moment in God's world,
 when so much of the world is feeling disconnected,
 isolated, alienated, alone, confused, grieving—
 suffering from violence, fleeing from violence...

And these people in God's world are hurting,
 they're not even THINKING about God's church,
 because they cannot imagine God's church—
 an institution!—being any use to them...

What if those are the very people whom God would like us to go to, to find, to discover, to befriend—not to turn them into Christians, but to show them God's love?

Who's not here?
 Have you ever asked yourself that?
 Who's NOT here, so that if we're going to see them, know them, love them...we'll have to GO TO them.

Luke tells us that the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling about Jesus:

“This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

In other words, Jesus is spending time with people who are not part of the religious establishment of Jesus' day. So what if these parables are nothing less than the church's marching orders:

If you are part of God's church, then your mission and purpose in life is to reach out to the sheep on the fringes, the ones whom no one else is reaching out to.

What if God is inviting us to go find the people who are the so-called “wrong kind of people,” whose lives appear to be STUCK, like they can never get out, like they have no hope...

The late preacher Dr. Frederick Samson loved to tell the story about the day he was walking along the beach, and saw a crane playing with a fish.

The crane had caught the fish in its mouth,
and was standing right where the waves come up on the sand.

What the crane would do is pick the fish up while the water was IN—*so that the fish couldn't swim in the water...*
but when the water was OUT—
the crane would drop the fish so it would flop around
again...

The next wave came IN, the crane picked up the fish.
The wave went OUT, and the crane dropped the fish in the sand.

Over and over this happened, that crane was having a BALL...not noticing that every time a wave came in, it was sucking the crane's feet further and further down into the sand.

Every wave that came in and went out,
the crane was getting a little deeper,
and a little deeper...

FINALLY, when he tired of his game,
the crane swallowed the fish and tried to lift up to fly—
only to discover that he was HOPELESSLY STUCK!!

So Dr. Samson went over to try to free the crane.
Dr. Samson was 6 ft, 4 inches...a tall, imposing man.

And that crane wasn't having ANY of that!!

Using its sharp beak, it cut Dr. Samson's hand as he tried to help free the crane.

Dr. Samson said to himself:

"I wish I could speak CRANE—because I would explain to this crane, 'I'm not trying to hurt you, I'm trying to HELP you...'"⁵

I don't how long Dr. Samson tried to free that crane.
Maybe he gave up and went home.
What I do know is that Jesus will NOT give up.

No matter who threatens him or hurts him or betrays him or even crucifies him, in Jesus Christ, we have a shepherd who will search and search until he finds every lost sheep.

And as it is with Christ, let it also be true for Christ's Church.

Amen.

⁵ I heard this story told by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright at the Festival of Homiletics many years ago.